Science and Mathematics Education Centre

Where some young people find themselves: Compelling reasons for studying the lives of early school leavers

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Declaration

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgement has been made. This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

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Abstract

Compulsory education clashes with students who avoid confrontation with it and abscond from it. This reflects my own lived experience. In my endeavours to gain understandings of the lived experiences of early school leavers through researching their reasons for leaving school early, I attend ethically to the degree that my personal life history helps me to empathise with the young people in my study, gain their confidence and demonstrate respect for them. I appreciate that this enables me to disclose compelling reasons for researchers to continue studying the life worlds of such young people.

By looking over the shoulders of other researchers and writers, I gain insight into ways of orienting my inquiry to the phenomenon of early school leavers. I develop tools for inquiry that attract rich data to increase understandings of what it may take for conscientious and devoted teachers to enable students to commit themselves to educational participation. Using three surveys and a process of dialogue, I gather, in deepening and unfolding ways, the thoughts and concerns of nearly 2000 students and former students in a large suburb where I teach to explain to me why they leave school early. According to Max van Manen, "lived meanings describe those aspects of a situation as experienced by the person in it" (p.183). As I describe and interpretively give meaning to lived experiences and life world perspectives of my research participants, and reflect on my own, my inquiry becomes a phenomenology of practice that I hope speaks to the professional lives of teachers.

This thesis consists of a quantitative and qualitative research project that reflects upon and soberly describes the lived situations of young people who voluntarily participate in it. I come to two main questions, one is enduring, about what we as educators and researchers can do to ease and sustain re-entry of early school leavers into educational purpose, the other is about transforming conditions of compulsory education that are palatable for them. I uncover a possible transforming moment of conversion that offers an educationally different space for young people.

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I thank my wife Lynne for her support in these endeavours, now we may be able to spend more time together.

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List of abbreviations, acronyms and explanations

TAFE Technical and Further Education

A technical college system for those students who wish to gain specialised certification.

ELSS Early Leavers Suburb Survey

The title I have given my surveys to distinguish them from any other surveys on similar topics. There are three such surveys in this thesis.

Street Kids

The name given to the first of my discussion groups. The group gave this name to me because they believed they were street kids, as they had no home contact and were sleeping out in public or at a friend's house.

Local Early Leavers

The name allocated to the members of the second discussion group. These people were a selected group of young people, up to age 25, who lived in the northern suburbs and responded to my local advertisements. All members of this group had been early school leavers.

Potential Early Leavers

This group were the third of my discussion groups. They were current year 11 and 12 students who said they were going to leave before the end of year 12 or who had siblings who had left school early.

Bogans

A derogatory term given to people who lived in the northern suburbs by those who did not live in the area.

Chiggers

Another derogatory term for people from the same area.

Goth

A classification, by young people, of the music/culture group to which they belong. The subculture has an undeserved reputation of being for young people who are over concerned with death. A style of dress is based on punk and Victorian attire, or combinations of the two, most often with dark attire, makeup and black hair.

Prep (preparatory) is an early education program, only offered in primary schools. It is a full-time program and children attend from Monday to Friday during normal school hours, generally from 9am to 3pm. Children are usually 5years old by 30 June in the year they start Prep.

LSAY Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth

An annual survey carried out in Australia by the Australian Council for Educational Research and the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST).

ABS Australian Bureau of Statistics

A department of the Federal Government which gathers statistics for making government policy decisions.

Wagging

A term used by local students to refer to absconding from school, skipping classes or not turning up when expected to do so.

Chroming

The street word for paint sniffing—you spray the can of paint into a paper bag and then place your mouth and nose over the bag and sniff. You usually end up with a circle of paint around your mouth and nostrils.

Chapter One
Compelling reasons for studying the lives of early school leavers

I began wagging school because I was bored and hated going to maths class. I found maths very difficult and would often ask for help; my requests for help often ended with the maths teacher making fun of me in front of the whole class. This was very embarrassing! Every time I had maths, I knew I would get into trouble because I hated the teacher. After a while, I got used to wagging so it became a habit (Janelle, aged 16).

I became concerned about the future of the young people I was teaching in years 11 and 12. My concern heightened when staff wanted me to remove a young girl from the school due to her bad attendance record. Her results indicated she was a good student. There had to be another reason for her poor class attendance. I asked her to drop into my office the next time she arrived at school, and before she had gone to classes. After a brief discussion, I discovered something her class room teacher should have known. Becky was working in a part-time position for thirty-five hours per week. She was also attempting to attend the compulsory class time of twenty hours per week, complete her assignments and prepare for examinations. Our discussion revealed her need to help her mother, and pay for her clothes, books and school fees. My concern became, how many others of my students were trying to do the same? Was this a natural occurrence for students from this suburb? I found some research material, and the statistics associated with early school leavers and embarked on my research. I read this.

> Young people of school age in affluent western countries, particularly those from non-traditional, adverse and challenging backgrounds, are disengaging, tuning out, and switching off schooling at alarming and

> unprecedented rates. Official statistics show that between 30-40 per cent of young people are making the active choice not to complete high school or secondary education, with figures dramatically higher in some local settings (Smyth, Down, & MacInerney, 2010, p. 1).

When we were young my sister, brothers and I would sit around the kitchen table at night doing our homework. When we believed our homework was finished we would take it our father, if he was home, and if he thought the writing was not neat enough, or we had an inconsistent slope to our letters, he would tear out the page, screw it up and throw it in the fire. We would then have to complete the homework again. Sometimes this might be two or three times. In the end I would tell him I had no homework or only complete a small part of what was required and let him think that was all I had to do for the evening.

My personal history definitely has an inspiring effect on my research and I endeavoured to be aware of any bias. My current dealing with students is an influence on the topic of my research. The best resources I have for my inquiry is my empathetic nature and my ability to relate to young people. I considered my shortcomings to be in what I called administrative 'trivia' and my desire to reach a conclusion quickly.

My lived experience of being an early school leaver continues to haunt me, and I wonder often about its effect on the ways I conceive of my world. I came to look more closely at Gadamer's (1989) concept of "forethought" and what bias I might bring to any research I might begin. Because of my own experiences as a teenager, I became interested in the problems of students and what could be changed or instigated to assist them.

I begin this work with an autobiographical narrative of my lived experience as a child who was subjected to compounding circumstances that caused him to abscond from

school and home, hide away to himself in secret places and leave school early. Though the ending is a fortuitous one, I tell it as a means of linking my experience empathically with that of today's early school leavers as a prelude that opens this thesis up to lived experience in the lives of young people to which I address my research in order to deepen my understanding of the phenomenon of early school leavers.

This is an account from an era that precedes the time of research and writing. Yet it mirrors the same kind of events that cause young people to desert school—social, economic and political circumstances outside a person's control, damage caused through family violence, parental influence, teacher dominance and abomination of student dignity, inadequate teacher development, as well as what it might take to 'get a break', see a light of hope at the end of the tunnel, and become dependent on self-responsibility and responsibility for others.

Absconding from education

The era in which I attended school was one that offered many job opportunities for low-skilled workers. There was also a high degree of physical punishment to instil discipline at both school and home.

My very first reason to dislike education began on my first day in class 1A, what is now called Prep class. I was about 5 years of age and my family had just moved from the country to a rural town on the North-western coast of Tasmania to enable my older brother and I to attend school. We walked about three miles to school, most of it downhill and then back up the hill after school. Buses were not available and very few people had cars. I arrived late for class on the first day. The teacher took me to the front of a very large class and told me, if I arrived late again I would "get the cane", that is, she would hit me several times on the hand or on my backside. The next day I did arrive late

and I was scared of being caned by this large, fearsome woman dressed in the black garb of a nun. I waited until my brother went to his class to make sure he would not follow me and get into trouble, and then I absconded from or, in Australian terms, I 'wagged' school.

Having successfully achieved this feat, I decided to do it every day. Our parents did not have a phone and back then there was less checking on student attendance than there is today. I spent a fortnight of wagging and hiding in trees until the end of the school day. One day my father was driving home in the work jeep. I was so surprised to see him I jumped from the tree and waved. He took me home, had his lunch and then questioned me about being out of school.

"Why aren't you in school?" he said.

"Because we had a half day off."

"Where's Kevin?"

"The big kids had to stay at school. Only the little kids had the half day off."

He realised I was lying. Kevin was still amongst the little kids too though he was a year ahead of me.

He strapped me with his razor strop, took me back to school and at the end of lunch assembly he made me apologise to the teacher in front of the whole school. The teacher caned me for missing classes. After this incident I decided that I would wag school on various occasions but ensure that I did not get caught. My reputation preceded me in every class I was forced to attend throughout primary school. I was often caned for talking in class, not remembering lessons and general boyish behaviour. Corporal punishment was an accepted form of control in classes, no matter the age of the student or the reason for punishment. There were bamboo canes for boys, and leather straps for girls.

My father was a frustrated man, a serviceman in the Second World War at 16 years of age and a product of the earlier 1930s economic depression. Whereas some people, who had gone through these upheavals may have had a different approach, my father, who returned from the war with a serious injury, became dependent on alcohol, he believed his way to riches was through gambling, and anyone in the family who stood in his way or upset his way of life would be physically abused. My father had been a semi-professional boxer at one stage of his life and family punishment was usually to be punched. Dad was forced into leaving school during his primary years because of the economic depression of 1930. This left him with much resentment because he was a very intelligent person and went on to spend the remainder of his life learning any piece of new information he could glean, no matter how esoteric it may have appeared to anyone else. His nickname at work was "The Professor." His own lack of educational opportunities caused him to place pressure on his children to be educated. We all had either to succeed in everything or receive some form of physical punishment. Likewise, his time in the armed services and the damage done to him during the war resulted in a firm belief that his sons would be men, and the only way this could occur was to put on the gloves and fight it out with him.

My mother was of completely different character. She had received an education and opportunities that most women at the time did not. She was a nurse and met our father during the war. Her values and beliefs taught us about love for each other and how we could achieve anything we wanted without being expected to undergo some form of physical or mental abuse.

My teachers at primary school and secondary school were members of religious orders. Many of them had little or no teacher training and some were undergoing courses while trying to teach. Class sizes were often in the range of forty to fifty students.

Control was absolute and enforced with physical punishment. There was no opportunity to be an individual and develop your own character. It was impressed upon you that certain conditions made you a good Christian gentleman and any deviation from the mould would be punished often and hard, even for something as simple as talking in class. Because of my garrulous nature, I often went home with blood seeping through my trousers from receiving the cane across my buttocks. The most strokes I received in any one day was twenty-four. When I mentioned this to my father he hit me again, for two reasons—one, you do not complain and two, you do not embarrass the family.

Another example of continued physical punishment occurred in my maths class. In year 7, I began at a new school. Intending to make a new start, I sat in the front row right near the door and far away from my friends. The teacher, a priest, walked in to the class, pointed at me and said, "What is the difference of two squares?" I had no idea, stood up and said so, he then used a large ruler side on to flick my posterior. This was quite painful. I sat down and he grabbed me by the hair and raised me out of the seat, hit me again and told me to stand. He gradually went around the classroom asking other students maths questions. When they failed to answer, he came back up the front and hit me saying "They should have known the answers, shouldn't they." I had the same teacher for three years in a row.

My response to continued physical discipline from both home and school was to leave school and move interstate without completing year 10. At a very early age, I had been told that all I would be good for was a ditch digger with the local council. Only one teacher bothered to help me clarify what my skills were and where my interests lay. In hindsight, I came to realise that my lack of interest in the subjects and my constant non-attendance were the cause of both teacher and parent frustration with me, and may have led to some of the physical discipline inflicted on me. I also came to discover, with

hindsight, that many of the teachers who taught me had no teaching skills. Their classroom management was left to the application of the cane and keeping students in a state of fear. In a recent discussion with one of those former teachers he told me that they were all very young, having just left the seminary, and were studying part-time for teaching qualifications while just keeping ahead of the students they were teaching.

I found that I was completely bored with the way teachers taught their subjects and lost interest in the subject matter of the lessons. If I could master something I wanted to move on, not continue with the same topic. In first year French, for instance, I got 99 per cent, in second year 50 per cent, and in third year, I got 7 per cent. Going over and over the same things numbed me. My self-designed independence, the necessity to survive while living a harsh lifestyle and the freedom to choose my own career path gave me confidence to complete an apprenticeship in electronics and technology. Later, after I was married, I realised that my education was incomplete. I began to teach myself in the evenings and undertook correspondence classes in the subjects required to meet entrance standards for university. After successful completion of these subjects, my wife and I, together with our two small sons, moved to Hobart to enable my attendance at University. I washed dishes to provide an income for our family and worked full-time as a tradesman during the long Christmas breaks. Since then I have completed a number of diplomas and a Master's degree.

My absconding was occurring in a different era, when post-war trauma was silently influencing people's behaviour, when teacher education was low or limited, when corporal punishment, as strict admonishment, was a means of instilling fear and control, and when education was nevertheless considered essential. As a teacher now, I wonder whether my reasons for escaping school resonate with the reasons young people turn away from school today. Were they physically punished at home? Did they

experience traumatic environments? Were their interests in any topic nourished and extended? Were their choices to leave out of independence, boredom or a search for freedom? Were they forced out or was it a personal choice?

The compulsoriness of education in Australia

In the post-war era of plenty of jobs for the unskilled and unemployment almost unheard of, school was compulsory until only 15 years of age. There was little one could do to be hidden from school—you could not go home because your mother was there, you could go to the beach or bushlands. Truant officers might catch you if you went into town. The idea was to wait until you turned 15, to leave legally, or gain an apprenticeship. There were ways around education's compulsoriness for young people for whom school was alien. There were no telephones to report absenteeism to parents. It was not unusual to see a primary or secondary age student walking to the hospital, doctor or dentist by himself or herself. Today's technology and the custodial culture of parents means less freedom to hide and more drastic measures for young people to assert their rejection of control. And worse, the control happens at a time of youth transition to adulthood when they are becoming aware and desirous of taking responsibility for themselves.

Historically, in western societies, education was not the providence of the masses but something provided for an 'elite' who were able to divest themselves from the cares and concerns of the world and enter a life of seclusion. The early 'schools' and communities of scholars and teachers, and universities, were in actual fact monasteries or monastic schools in which monks studied, contemplated, taught others and wrote.

In later centuries learning took on two forms. The first was for those considered talented enough to undertake an enduring apprenticeship under a master. The system of apprenticeship was first developed in the later Middle Ages and came to be supervised by

craft guilds and town governments. A master craftsman was entitled to employ young people as an inexpensive form of labour in exchange for providing food, lodging and formal training in the craft. Most apprentices were males, but female apprentices were later to be found in crafts such as sewing and tailoring. Apprentices usually began at 10 to 15 years of age, and would live in the master craftsman's household (Aldrich, 1997).

The second form was for those from an affluent background who could pay for their own tuition, usually in the comfort of their home. In John Locke's notes, as stated in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, reprinted in *The Harvard Classics* (2001), he writes of what should constitute the education of a young gentleman, he even goes so far as to tell the father to spare no cost to gain a good tutor. In that which concerns "a young gentleman's studies, his tutor should remember, that his business is not so much to teach him all that is knowable, as to raise in him a love and esteem of knowledge; and to put him in the right way of knowing and improving himself when he has a mind to it" (Locke, 2001, p. 143).

The advent of universal education in Australia had in itself caused great concerns and debate (Barcan, 1980), concern over who should benefit from the education, what age it should begin, and who should cover the cost of education. The Public School systems in Australia did not begin until considerably later than the 1868 Tasmanian Education Act, beginning with primary level schools, then expanding into the secondary area beginning in the 1880s.

It is interesting that the term "compulsory" in Australian education appears first in the 1868 Education Act of Tasmania and then in the 1872 Education Act of Victoria, a colony founded by Tasmanians. The Victorian Act set down secular, compulsory education for a child between 6 and 15 years of age and for sixty days in each half of the year (Victorian Colonial Parliament, 1872). It is interesting to note that the age for

compulsory education remained almost static in the Australian states until the recession of the 1990s when it was raised once more. More recently, in some states of Australia, it was raised to 17 years or completion of year 10 provided students had work or further study. The New South Wales Government was the last state to make changes to its Education Act in January 2009, announcing that "These changes will abolish students' entitlement to leave school when they turn 15, the lowest leaving age in Australia, which has been in place for more than fifty years" (NSW Parliament, 1990).

In an effort to improve student outcomes and contribute to economic prosperity, all Australian states and territories, have policies and programs that support student retention, flexible pathways and qualifications. Some states have introduced "learn or earn" strategies. These require young people to be engaged in school, training or meaningful work until at least the age of 17. In addition, all states and territories, since January 1, 2010, have raised the school leaving age to 17. The obligation of states to education is set down under constitutional arrangements, between the states and the Federal Government. Under constitutional arrangements, the Steering Committee for the review of government services asserts, "states and territories are … responsible for ensuring that children of compulsory school-age attend school" (2012, p. 8). Schools are responsible for much more, decrees the Committee, "for developing policy, delivering services, monitoring and reviewing performance of individual schools, regulating schools, and implementing the national curriculum."

The compulsory age for education in Scandinavian countries ends at 16 years of age. The United Kingdom rules since 2011 require all young people to continue with some kind of education or training until 18. Young people aged 16 or 17 may be employed if they enter an apprenticeship. The European Parliament suggest that all members of the European Union raise their compulsory age to 18 in order to help meet

their 2020 target of early school leaving age of less than 10 per cent for all member countries (Gusa & Buonadonna, 2011).

It is important to demonstrate how poorly Australia performs in retaining young people at school. A study, entitled *Access to Education and Training, Basic Skills and Early School Leavers*, was presented to the European Commission in 2005. It states that ten countries, including most of the Scandinavian countries, have an early school leaving rate of less than 10 per cent. Another nine had a rate of less than 16 per cent and a further six countries, including the United Kingdom, were below the Australian figure of 25 per cent. Only Malta, Portugal, Spain and Iceland were the European countries above 25 per cent, performing less well than Australia. The report was prepared by GHK, a leading independent multi-discipline consultancy service who research poverty reduction programs (2005).

I am concerned to illustrate what is actually compulsory for children in Tasmania. A Tasmanian child who is at least 5 years of age as at 1 January in any year must be enrolled at a school or be provided with home education for that year and subsequent years until the child reaches the age of 17 years, unless exempted or excused under the Education Act (2008). The exemption applies to those who are undertaking employment or another form of training. The transition phase between compulsory education and 17 years of age may begin when the young person is 16 years of age. In Tasmania, a person's required participation phase starts when the person reaches the age of 16 years, and ends when the first of the following occurs. The person has participated in eligible options for one year after attaining the age of 16 years. The person gains a certificate III qualification. The person reaches the age of 17 years (Tasmanian Parliament Guaranteeing Futures Act, 2008). Effectively the Act requires compulsorily keeping

students at school in Secondary Colleges or TAFE to year 12. Schools and TAFE are to retain the students.

Compulsory education for a young person should be concerned "not so much to teach him all that is knowable, as to raise in him a love and esteem of knowledge; and to put him in the right way of knowing and improving himself when he has a mind to it" (Locke, 2001, p. 143). It is now firmly linked to political desire for extended and improved retention rates and excites competition between states and nations to see who can perform best at controlling students at school.

My reading of literature related to my field of inquiry raised for me the questions of the need for such a late ending to compulsory education and whether the type of education or the curriculum that is offered was appropriate to the needs of all students. In Australia, this general trend of a late ending to compulsory schooling has been confirmed (Lamb, Dwyer & Wyn, 2000), although several studies have also pointed to young people establishing successful lives without completing senior secondary education (McMillan & Marks, 2003).

Kitty te Riele presented a paper at the 2004 Australian Association for Research in Education Symposium in which she stated,

> Nevertheless, OECD and other international literature, national and state policy, and discussion in the media have contributed to the dominant belief that upper secondary education has become compulsory in practice, if not in legislation, as a foundation for a secure adult life. From the late 1980s onwards, Australian education policy actively encouraged young people to stay at school to complete senior secondary education (years 11 and 12) (te Riele, 2004, p. 2).

Since the late 1980s, retention to year 12 in Australia has increased dramatically, from 35 per cent in 1980 to 75 per cent in 2002 and more recently was reported as being 78 per cent (ABS, 2011b). Rather than belonging to the mainstream majority, young people who leave school before year 12 are now perceived by schools, TAFEs, Government and community as being "at risk" (MCEETYA, 2002).

Location of my research: Where my research located and began

While Australia is physically a large country, its population is relatively small and not as diverse in language and culture as, say, the same physical area in Europe. There are six states and two territories, the physical size and population density varies between each state due to factors such as environment, arable land and resources. The homogeneous nature of Australia's education standards means that a study in the states of New South Wales or Victoria could also apply to most other areas of Australia.

The geographical area for my research is in the state of Tasmania, an island to the south of mainland Australia. It is a small state both physically and in population. The population divides approximately into three distinct areas. Two areas, south (population 255,000) and north (population 142,000), have the advantage of extended university facilities, large cities and a number of smaller industries. There is also a continuing demand for skills-based work in these areas. The third region is the western/north-western area (population 72,000) of the state which has relied predominantly on primary industry with one or two major industries that created bulk employment opportunities. The recent closing down of these major facilities has created a lack of opportunities for young people who do not see themselves as potential university students or find it too difficult to attend one of the major university campuses.

My research takes place in a particular suburb of the southern region of Tasmania. My reason for selecting this area is that I believe that the problems associated with young people are similar to those that Peter Dwyer (1996) found in the western/north-western region of Tasmania. Local industries have reduced employment numbers or have become more technical in their production methods resulting in a high degree of youth unemployment and social instability (Glenorchy City Council, 2010). The area for inquiry in the southern region of Tasmania also has a relatively high degree of early school leavers compared to other suburbs in the southern region (ABS, 2010b). This seemed a promising field for the inquiry I wished to undertake about the connection between degrees of self-esteem and expectations of success among the young people.

A primary goal of research was to explore and understand why there exists, in a localised area of the capital city of Hobart, a high incidence of young people leaving school prior to the end of year 12. Questions have been, and continue to be, asked (Holden & Youth Research Centre (1992), Eivers, Ryan & Brinkley (2000), Khoo & Ainley (2005), (S. Lamb & Rice, 2008) — what common factors might exist amongst early school leavers' reasons for leaving? Are there some particular strategies that might be assessed in order to assist students from this suburban area to stay at school for the long-term benefits of graduating from year 12? There has been hearsay and anecdotal evidence from teachers, parents and students about the reasons for students leaving school before the end of year 12. This evidence was valuable to me when I had the position of Head of Campus at a senior secondary college within my suburban research area. My own youthful experiences were already driving me to try to find possible associations between factors affecting early school leavers and the socio-economic area I honed into for study. The suburban area's score on the Australian Bureau of Statistics Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas, Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage is

920.4 (ABS, 2010b) making the area the eighth most disadvantaged Local Government Area in Tasmania, and second most disadvantaged in the Hobart Statistical Area.

My college had asked me to work on a project to improve the college's student retention rate and to attempt to lessen the number of students who were leaving during year 12. The campus was losing an average of forty-five students each year between the start of the school year and just after the mid-year examination results were available. I began to interview each of the students deemed by staff to be at risk of becoming early school leavers and those students whom the staff recommended should be excluded from school. Working with these students and advertising student activities for them at campus assemblies — for example, setting up an information booth once a week at the local shopping centre to promote what the students were participating in at the college and asking students to work together voluntarily to set up a strolling and sitting park for the elderly — I began to gain some initial but as yet unsatisfying understandings of how the "at risk of leaving" students felt about school, their subjects and teachers. The students turned up out of uniform, wearing beanies, looking tough as nuts, and made tea for the elderly who sat with them and told stories of their own long ago school experience!

I use the term "early school leavers" in this thesis to refer to all students who leave school prior to the end of year 12. Some states of Australia only require students to remain at compulsory schooling until 16 years of age, an age students usually are by the end of year 10. In some of the literature I read, students, who leave prior to the compulsory age, are referred to as "under-age school leavers" and those who leave in years 11 and 12 are referred to as "early school leavers" (Brookes, Milne, Paterson, Johannsson, & Hart, 1997). The term "early school leavers" may also include those

students who leave school prior to the end of year 12 and who are not involved in further education or training.

I emphasise this meaning for the words, early school leavers, because I note that in many international publications (Chapman, Laird, Ifill and Kewal-Ramani, 2011); (European Commission & Thematic Working Group, 2013) the word “drop-out” is used. In Australia, the term “drop-out” has a pejorative connotation, and I wished to avoid that in my thesis out of respect for my young participants.

Diverse and iterative opportunities for following my research questions

I came to believe that a new inquiry in relation to issues to do with educational retention, student marginalisation and youth transition could explore ways of considering and thinking about education for these students from different perspectives altogether from already existing research — thus the shift my inquiry makes is from focussing research on schools, systems and community to understanding the lived experiences and voices of students who become early school leavers. The questions which guide this inquiry would be — What is it like to be an early school leaver? Why do early school leavers make individual choices to leave school? What possible strategies might constitute potential to convert early school leavers into life long learners? My essential research goals were to make a significant and original contribution to knowledge about what motivates or not early school leavers to continue with education, bring into deeper and more nuanced understanding about the lifeworlds of early school leavers that would exert ethical, compassionate and pragmatic challenges by identifying compelling reasons for studying their lives, and advocating strategies that might improve the quality of their lives and futures through developing trusted relationships with others and positive attitudes to lifelong learning.

From my reading, understanding and experience, I believe there are no two students alike. Whilst research has come up with a large number of strategies for

improving school retention, that is keeping students at school — literacy programs, career counselling, restructuring schools to retain older students in purposefully developed curricula for future education, introducing vocational education and training in TAFE colleges as well as senior secondary schools — every early school leaver has his or her own life's reason for their choice to leave. Within the 85 people who took part in my three discussion groups I discovered 17 different factors that might have influenced their choice. One person might be influenced by one factor or by several. There is no one key factor, nor one key strategy, that I believed could redeem one's early school leaving to not leaving. Was there a common denominator I could find, elaborate and understand, that importantly in one way would add to the body of knowledge about the lifeworlds of early school leavers, but more importantly would offer life advantage to the young people themselves? My job in the inquiry would be to seek out the early school leavers themselves, in the places where they find refuge, as they have difficulty in connecting to people, places and institutions where they have originally suffered.

One of my dilemmas was to create, explain and emphasise my approach as both a person and a researcher who is curious, observant, reflective and interpretive. I would wish to check that I was responding openly and empathetically to participants, rather than engaging in a "misguided form of projective identification or countertransference (Finlay, 2006 p.4)." Might I only see the early school leavers I seek out as mirrors for myself? Was my experience reflective of their experience? Was this a valid method of empathising? I wished eventually to be building trust amongst early school leavers in discussion groups and dialogue sessions where I hoped to create a place for mutual understanding between us, and early school leavers with one another. My intention was always to endeavour to understand more profoundly, hopefully together with some early school leavers, the experience of choosing to leave school early, and that of then living

it. I was hoping to show that understanding what being an early school leaver could be like as an experience that can be mutually shared.

As my strategy for inquiring was developing phenomenologically, that is, along the ways of studying lived experience of early school leavers, another important question to raise is about what light might phenomenological practice — exploring possible understandings of lived experience, suspending beliefs about them, standing back from them, reflecting upon them consciously in order to disclose interpretive possibilities for understanding them — shed on the process (Finlay, p.4).

To meet these kinds of challenges I exploited a number of different opportunities stemming from levels of knowledge, relationships and empathy I had already nourished in my career as early school leaver, then apprentice, and then teacher, mentor, school administrator and academic researcher.

The different opportunities that lay before me and that turned me to account in my research method and methodology allowed a number of conceptual frameworks to develop through which I could work.

There is a world-wide problem that schools were and still are encountering and trying to solve — far too many secondary school students choose to leave school early and far too many disadvantages result for them in their lives.

There was a large body of researched literature that included variously conceptualised “answers” to the problem. There was a fair amount of debate amongst researchers and writers.

In Tasmania within my geographical and vocational reach was a large cohort of possible participants in my proposed research. There were good conditions for their participation to be willing, given that schools and their administrators were familiar with my initial traditional type of approach — using a questionnaire they would approve and assist in its conduct and circulation.

From the large number of questionnaire responses there was potential to survey and identify both quantitative and qualitative data that would lend itself to further questioning in other modes of relating to participants through discussion and dialogue groups. The relationships built with participating schools, students and early school leavers themselves that I would develop along the way offered entry to conversations in which participants could share their lived experience, and, at times, perhaps allow me to become a mentor for planning future goals for their continuing education and work.

All of these contexts offered diverse and iterative opportunities for inquiry that was hermeneutic (interpretive) and phenomenological (studying lived experience), that allowed me as researcher to situate myself historically and geographically within my inquiry at relational levels of lived experience, and that allowed me to suspend judgement. In conceptualising a research process that was to be open-ended, informed by previous research, and intentionally transcending through reflection what I as researcher was observing, finding and exploring, I was embracing some of the dilemmas and challenges that were to come about as my inquiry proceeded. My inquiry was to require reconceptualising and further designing if I were to unfold and communicate in my thesis a rich and deeply nuanced understanding of my research questions — What is it like to be an early school leaver? Why do early school leavers leave school? What possibilities might there exist or become that might convert early school leavers into lifelong learners?

It was with the voluntary action in conducting the informal exit surveys I used to discuss with students who were informing me, as their Head of Campus, of their intention to leave school before finishing their courses that I began to conceptualise the research in my study. I often felt that they were coming to me for permission to leave. I did not find it easy to let them go without making some attempt to understand why they were leaving and, given my own personal background, I would press myself into thinking there must be something I could do about it.

I enrolled in a Higher Research Degree and set about finding ways to obtain some ideas of what students were thinking about when the first inklings of leaving school early were raised amongst them.

Background Studies from Australia, Ireland, United Kingdom, the European Community and the United States of America

Before I actually began my research, I engaged in reading studies related to experiences of early school leavers. I was developing an understanding of the questions I wanted my research to address. I discovered,

> The study of student experiences in elementary and secondary school has evolved considerably, especially over the last forty-five years. Since 1990, the number of studies in this field of study has significantly increased, the nature and scope of the research has expanded, and the methodology used to frame the study of student experience has become quite diverse (Theissen & Cook-Sather, 2007, p. 1).

My own educational foundations and family background, as well as the role I held in a senior college within the suburban area around which this research is based, was propelling me.

I found in existing research a large number of theories that attempted to mend and prevent student disengagement through making changes in school systems, structures and curriculum with varieties of suggested retention practices. Researchers provided issues for debate over what factors were the most disturbing, the most dependent on environmental or economic and sociological contexts, and those that might be the most manageable to repair, pragmatically and systemically. For example, one strong pervasive argument for keeping students at school, is to argue that it ought to be compulsory that students remain in school until the age of 17. My concern was to understand why, when there was so much faith in retaining young people at school to better their future, a worrying number of students still leave school early. This must require me to question the effect that lengthening compulsory education — that is, making staying at school to higher ages compulsorily and legally required —will or must improve retention rates in schools. I must question the effect that such a mandate must have on the living experiences and dispositions of young people as they approach the independence that is the promise of adulthood. But before continuing to examine what researchers were saying about prolonging education for young people, I determinedly recall John Locke's assertion on page 22 above because I want the sentiment and spirit of this to stand before me continuously as I proceed. Compulsory education for a young person, says Locke, should be concerned

> not so much to teach him all that is knowable, as to raise in him a love and esteem of knowledge; and to put him in the right way of knowing and improving himself when he has a mind to it (Locke, 2001, p. 143).

Now I can continue with the review of pathways articulation for 16-18 year-old students in Queensland, chaired by Margaret Gardner's (2002), in which she found some good reasons for why compulsorily extending the age of student participation in schooling in Queensland would work very well for about half of the students. This half included students with good literacy and numeracy skills and these students were more likely to go on to TAFE or university. Gardner found this benefit for groups of students who were mostly from families living in urban areas where at least one of the adults worked, with a good steady income, were usually from non-indigenous backgrounds and had a strong support base at home to do well in education. Their parents valued education and saw the long-term benefits of completing school. Extra benefits for the students were that they usually came from families without domestic violence, and that provided the girls did not become pregnant, girls usually did better than boys (Gardner, 2002).

Low literacy and numeracy skills appear amongst indigenous students, those who live in low socio-economic situations, or in rural areas. As Gardner (2002) points out, young people with problems in mainstream education, such a low literacy and numeracy skills, are also likely to be living with drug or alcohol issues, have violent family situations and may be struggling with racism, stigma and homophobia. These young people attract the theory that they are "at risk". It is worthwhile noting here that Gardner did not propose that pathway articulation through curricula would assist this second half of the Queensland students in her review.

That education must be compulsory is not always a proposition that families and individuals can have much control over. The environment in which students live affects the composition of their school's enrolment. The socio-economic background of the

students can account for many reasons that effect achievement levels, confidence and drop-out rates. Eemer Eivers, Eoin Ryan and Aoife Brinkley (2000) argue through their research findings that, "Where schools have an enrolment that is predominantly disadvantaged, pupils tend to do worse academically, and to have higher drop-out rates than would be predicted from analysis of pupil characteristics at an individual level" (Eivers, Ryan, & Brinkley, 2000, p. 12).

Joel Spring (2010) says at risk students tend to come from one or a mix of the following circumstances: they may be "classed" as, or actually experience, low socio-economic status; they may be living in a single-parent home; or they may need to change schools at non-traditional times, such as during the school year. Spring expects students from such circumstances to have had below-average attendance in years at middle school, to be more likely to be held back a year in school in order to "catch up", to suffer from peer pressure, and to have older siblings who left high school before completion. The Australian Productivity Commission (2012) colludes with Spring in its description of "at risk" students. It identifies such young people as socio-economically disadvantaged in a situation that has an effect on their school completion — low-quality living environments, family unemployment, low income, poor health outcomes and parental education levels. This Commission asserts that "Socioeconomic disadvantage can result in poor school attendance and lower retention rates, less readiness for schooling and poorer average outcomes at school as students are less likely to have resources that stimulate learning or parental academic support" (p. 18).

The emphasis on improving retention rates through extending compulsory years for attending school does not provide an adequate answer for why students leave school early. Compulsoriness, as my thesis will demonstrate, is not a sufficient motivation for continuing to attend school programs and courses. Motivation for attending school to be

educated does not necessarily come from a person's appraisal of his or her life circumstances — where and how he or she live, which set of social or economic advantage he or she is able to access. Nor might motivation be influenced by what might be generally expected of a person who lives in a certain suburban or rural area, by what might be referred to as the 'post code effect', or whose world occurs within a particular religious or indigenous culture. It is well known that students from low socio-economic backgrounds, single parent homes and dysfunctional families are more likely to disobey compulsory rules, care less about them, and leave school earlier than those students who are supported at home. I believe and profess that such students, all students I can say, become motivated in learning when they are taken an interest in by teachers and have examples of the educational successes of their peers to follow.

Why arguments for retaining young people at school as young adults fall short for engaging them in learning and keeping them at school

Amongst the more recent studies there are two significant bodies of research that impinge upon, and provide a background to the rationale I developed for establishing my inquiry in the geographic and socio-economic area I decided upon. The first relates to studies that describe learning pathways for young people to gain employment. The second relates to the social and economic contexts in which young people live and participate.

First then, let me reflect upon skills and employment that require curriculum and set out pathways for learning. Studies of early school leaving have been done in a number of developed countries, such as those conducted in the United Kingdom under the auspices of the Learning and Skills Development Agency (pre 2006) and the Quality Improvement Agency, in the United States of America by Scales (Slaughter, 2000) and by the Institute for Research and Reform in Education at Baltimore (Klem & Connell,

2004) and in Ireland at the Educational Research Centre at St. Patrick's College in Dublin (Eivers et al., 2000). Technological growth in manufacturing industries in second and third world countries has propitiated economic imperatives by governments to have young people fully trained to enter either academic pathways, or pathways based around services such as trades or retail (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001).

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2006), the less skilled jobs have declined over the past forty years. Most of those working in retail trade are employed part-time (77 per cent), and growth in part-time employment is much less prevalent in the construction (14 per cent) and manufacturing (20 per cent) industries. The proportion of employed men aged 15-19 years working in retail trade has increased markedly from 29% since 1985-86. The proportion employed in the construction industry has also increased by five percentage points since 1985-86. The structural changes in the Australian economy are reflected in the proportion of employed males aged 15 to 19 years working in the manufacturing industry. Thus, the proportion of males employed in manufacturing has halved over the past twenty years from 22 per cent in 1985-86, that is, within one generation, nineteen years later.

Once, those who left school early would expect to find a range of jobs. Now acquiring jobs becomes rare for them. A study by the Youth Affairs Network of Queensland (2003) found that there has been a shift from an economy based around industry, and manufacturing in particular, where there were jobs for people of various levels of educational attainment, to an economy based on knowledge and a highly skilled labour force. There are some jobs still available for those people with fewer skills than others. However, without skills and qualifications the financial reward and job security offered by these positions is minimal—only casual and part-time employment becomes offered.

In Australia, the Australian Qualifications Framework was developed to encourage business, industry and education institutions to collaborate and provide opportunities of choice for young people to enter skill pathways at levels of personal capacity and discretion, and proceed toward further qualification and recognition. Detailed descriptions of the different levels in the AQF can be found in the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) Implementation Handbook (2007).

Employment for young people can be quite different to that for older people and is often characterised by lower paid jobs, less skilled occupations, and less job security (Wooden & VandenHeuvel, 1999). The employment opportunities available to Australians, and the choices they make, vary throughout the employment cycle. Younger people in the workforce (15 to 19 years) are generally employed in relatively low skilled occupations such as elementary clerical, sales and service workers in a limited range of industries like retail trade (ABS, 2006).

The determination of the skill level of each occupation requires some subjective judgement. With continuing changes in education and training initiatives, in particular the terminology used when describing formal educational qualifications, the explanation of "less-skilled" becomes a generalised concept rather than a definitive one. Being "less-skilled" applies across the board of all jobs. For example, with the advent of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) as a necessary skill in many jobs, people who work in industries where basic ICT skills are required may have obtained them by learning while on-the-job. Though, current Tasmanian students, prospective employees of such industries, will have had some basic ICT skills, given that basic ICT skills training is one requirement of high school pathway planning processes. A large number of Tasmanian schools have laptop computers for all students and some schools now use tablet technology with few text books and note books. This in itself can become a risked

decision by schools because other skills like writing, speaking and listening might deteriorate. Another example is that a young person can have qualified to have a number and diversity of training skill certificates that match AQF standards and still be unable to acquire employment. This person is waiting to enter employment supposedly "skilled" but with low AQF rankings.

But skill is an attribute of an occupation and not necessarily an attribute of the person currently working in a particular occupation. In conceptualising my research and later my thesis, I became concerned that young people ought not to be excluded from work because they have not yet exposed or exercised their skills and shown the potential competence they have in a particular occupation. Employment advertisements might say "must have experience." How do young people "get experience" without opportunity? Retaining young people at school compulsorily to ensure skill and competence development, for me, loses its meaning when promise, guarantee or confidence of entry into real employment, with its social and economic, and personal development benefits are absent.

Government interest and concerns about the social problems that develop amongst unemployed or unemployable people have increased to the point where investment in education and training strategies is now a serious issue toward alleviating future socio-economic problems foreseen for Australia's future development (Argy, 2006).

And so, secondly, let me return to the social and economic context in which young people participate, that which I have elaborated upon above and which became the original central theme from which the analysis of the data I collected for my thesis emerged and from which further conceptualisations of my questioning unfolded.

Throughout my thesis is the most compelling aspect of my concern — my questioning relates mostly to the social, that is, the interrelational and intersubjective problems that young people have been forced to deal with.

Dwyer (1996) completed a study in Devonport, a population centre of approximately 28,000 people in the north-western area of Tasmania, and provided information on the localised problem of youth unemployment in that area. Dwyer's research was helpful in the formulation of my own research. While Dwyer's research was completed some time ago, it was a helpful study for me to gain insight into the kinds of social and economic contexts of lived worlds in Tasmania in which young people find themselves.

Where young people find themselves

The world of young people in the second millennium is different to that of their parents and grandparents. A study by Don Anderson and Catherine Blakers (1983) shows that young people's failure to thrive can be traced to global economic and demographic shifts beginning in the 1980's. Anderson and Blakers tie the failure to thrive to three major economic factors worldwide. First, an increasingly globalised labour force means that workers can move more easily between countries. Second, education levels have soared around the world, meaning many more workers are available for skilled positions. Third, more women have joined the labour force (Anderson & Blakers, 1983, p. 170). All these factors mean more competition for jobs, particularly for young people who have little practical experience. In addition to changes in labour supply, technological changes have both created and destroyed jobs, with a trend towards fewer industrial jobs and more service sector jobs. The manufacturing work available to many young people who left

school early no longer exists for today's early school leaver in the suburban area of my research.

The need for higher education skills when seeking employment is creating a vacuum for those young people who do not demonstrate ability, motivation or opportunity to obtain those skills. As William Damon (2008) says, "the life prospects of a young person in today's world are far from certain. Only a few decades ago, almost all young people knew by the end of adolescence where they would live, what their occupation would be, and whom they would marry" (Damon, 2008, p. 1). There is a lack of certainty for many young people now. Those at risk of becoming early school leavers feel that uncertainty much more and will often become disengaged in education. A study by Meg Callanan, Rachel Kinsella, Jenny Graham, Olga Turczuk, and Steven Finch, (2009) identified three levels of disengagement: underachieving but not disengaged, moderate disengagement, and severe or complete disengagement (pp. 34-36).
Young people who find themselves unemployed and no longer in education or training are not a homogeneous group. This group spans a core of young people who have deep-rooted problems, lack motivation or are affected by their local economic situation. Tim Allen, Palak Mehta, and Simon Rutt, (2012) describe this group of young people as belonging in one of three categories, cyclical and likely to re-engage, floating and lacking direction or motivation and core or experiencing long-term disengagement from education, training and the labour force (p. 1).

Developing conceptual frameworks for my research

My very first approach therefore was to concentrate my research on the students who live in one particular southern suburb of Tasmania and to whom I was most likely to gain

access given my teacher- administrator- mentor- researcher situation. To assist with my research, I undertook three distinct inquiry processes. The first was a series of surveys of student opinion to get an idea of how students perceived themselves and their relationship to school. Next I established discussion groups and dialogue sessions with early school leavers from the same suburb. Then I worked with a group of early school leavers who called themselves "street kids" as a facilitator of dialogue and discussion and mentor. for possibly helping them with goal-setting for their futures.

The titles I gave my three surveys, to distinguish them from any other surveys on similar topics, is Early Leavers Suburb Survey One, Two and Three (ELSS One, ELSS Two and ELSS Three). ELSS One is the original survey of approximately 1500 year nine to year twelve students who were enrolled in full-time education at the time of the survey. ELSS Two is a survey of 165 of the students who were in year 10 at the time of survey one and who had reached year 12. ELSS Three is a survey of 68 of the students who were in year 9 at the time when ELSS One was undertaken and who had later progressed to year 12.

The initial ELSS One took place in two Catholic/Independent high schools and four public high schools. It also included students from one public senior secondary college and one Catholic/Independent senior secondary college. All of these schools were located within the municipal boundaries of the location of my research and the students who attended these schools tended to come mainly from this same municipal location. The young people who took part later in the three discussion groups also came from, or lived in, this suburb.

My research became sited deliberately within an area which includes approximately 44,000 people of low to middle income. The suburb also has a large proportion of 'at risk' students who fit into an expansion of the environments mentioned

by Spring (2010), environments such as a low socio-economic background, single parent homes, below average years, a family history of leaving school before the completion of year 12, negative peer pressure and low family expectations. The Australian Productivity Commission (2012) colludes with Spring in description of "at Risk" students — it identifies such young people as socio-economically disadvantaged in a situation that has an effect on their school completion — low-quality living environments, family unemployment, low income, poor health outcomes and parental education levels. The Commission asserts that "Socioeconomic disadvantage can result in poor school attendance and lower retention rates, less readiness for schooling and poorer average outcomes at school as students are less likely to have resources that stimulate learning or parental academic support" (p. 18).

The area is both densely industrial and residential. The local government body, the Municipal Council, has demonstrated its awareness of problems facing the youth at risk in its jurisdiction and has established a number of initiatives, such as a Youth Advisory Committee and Youth Drop-in Centres to give young people encouragement and voices in what is happening in their area. There is also a higher proportion of government housing compared to other suburbs of the same city (ABS, 2012). The Municipal Council has been proactive in the search for new industries and new opportunities for employment and entertainment.

Whilst working with potential early school leavers daily in a school, it was my alarm at the state of affairs that I describe above — that is changing society today and damaging the life chances of so many young people who are finding themselves cast adrift — that set me out on a quest to find out more about the reasons many young people opt out of school and to understand, more fully than I did before, their lived experience of schooling and of life outside school once they had left it. My research began with what

might be recognized as traditional quantitative and qualitative approaches—surveys, discussion groups and interviews. The three surveys over five years were what I considered to constitute first my quantitative research as I was able to gather data and quantify it for this sample of 1500 students. This allowed me to form generalizations of the results from the three survey samples to an entire population of interest and the measurement of the incidence of various views and opinions in the samples. I was then able to use these findings to locate qualitative data and enable me to refine my interview and discussion questions with discussion groups and dialogue sessions that prepared me for the research and inquiry work with the self-entitled "street kids" who populate my thesis.

I found though that I was to become more than a researcher, an onlooker, an observer of lives. I developed a variety of approaches and orientations that are evident in most human science studies that require deep interpretation and understanding to "grasp the fullness of lived experience" (van Manen, 1990, p. 181).

As the qualitative and quantitative data emerged, my research enclosed and disclosed its own story. As I drew from my own lived experience and the ways I have come to understand my own lifeworld it came to feature aspects of autoethnography as another frame for allowing my research and inquiry to unfold. As Carolyn Ellis, Tony Adams and Arthur Bochner (2010) suggest,

> Autoethnographers recognize the innumerable ways personal experience influences the research process. For instance, a researcher decides who, what, when, where, and how to research, decisions necessarily tied to institutional requirements (for example Institutional Review Boards), resources (e.g., funding), and personal circumstance (for example a researcher studying cancer because of personal experience with cancer). A researcher may also change

> names and places for protection (FINE, 1993), compress years of research into a single text, and construct a study in a pre-determined way (Ellis et al, 2010 p.2)

As narrator of my inquiry and participant in it, I was able to relate my own lived experience as a story related to the lived experience of those who took part in my research. It was their stories revealed to me, which had the impact of making my research unique as they revealed their lived experiences to me and opened themselves to scrutiny that might assist other early school leavers. After practising some aspects of this approach, I began to see how appropriate it was. I came to appreciate that the practices I had used in my teaching since I began were as appropriate for the approaches I could take in my inquiry and in writing my thesis. For example, if I were teaching labour economics, I would bring forth narratively my lived experience of being employed in situations at the Paper Mill to discuss award wages, the influence of unions and marginal costs and marginal revenues. My own experiences prior to becoming a teacher enabled me to use these experiences to elucidate many course topics for my senior students.

To really begin to understand their lives and their decision making, I had to risk embracing my own subjectivity, and develop a relationship to the participants in my study that was subject to subject, not subject to object. I began to see that my study was becoming phenomenological — there was a phenomenon I was researching, reflecting upon and discovering understandings about, the lived experience of early school leavers in a certain suburb in a certain city. I came to understand a deeper level of researching lived experience was available to me. My relationships with my participants could be dialogical and could become authentic, and morally authoritative. Charles Guignon (2008) in his article, *"Authenticity",* links the practice of authenticity as authority with virtue.

> To be authentic is to be clear about one's own most basic feelings, desires and convictions, and to openly express one's stance in the public arena. But that capacity is precisely the character trait that is needed in order to be an effective member of a democratic society. And if this is the case, then it would seem that a democratic society should be committed to promoting and cultivating authentic individuals (Guignon, 2008, p. 288).

Within this ideal of authenticity, I could be open in the public arena of the early school leavers of my research, I could speak forth in the public arena of my thesis about what concerns me most about the state of affairs in society today and for its young most vulnerable people and I could hope to influence the school systems' attitudes and caring for young people who are on the cusp of leaving school. I understood and practised the ethics that govern quantitative, qualitative, autoethnographic and phenomenological strategies for inquiry, standards of ethical inquiry that included the observation and practice of principles of respect, autonomy, confidentiality and privacy in regard to every individual's participation.

My thesis, I believe, demonstrates the research frameworks I conceptualised and the research practices I learned during the unfolding in my understanding, and hopefully for others, of what is enfolded in the lived experience of early school leavers. "Ultimately," says Bohm (1996), "the ground of everything is the en-folded, and the un-folded is just a display, or a show of enfolded" (p.102).

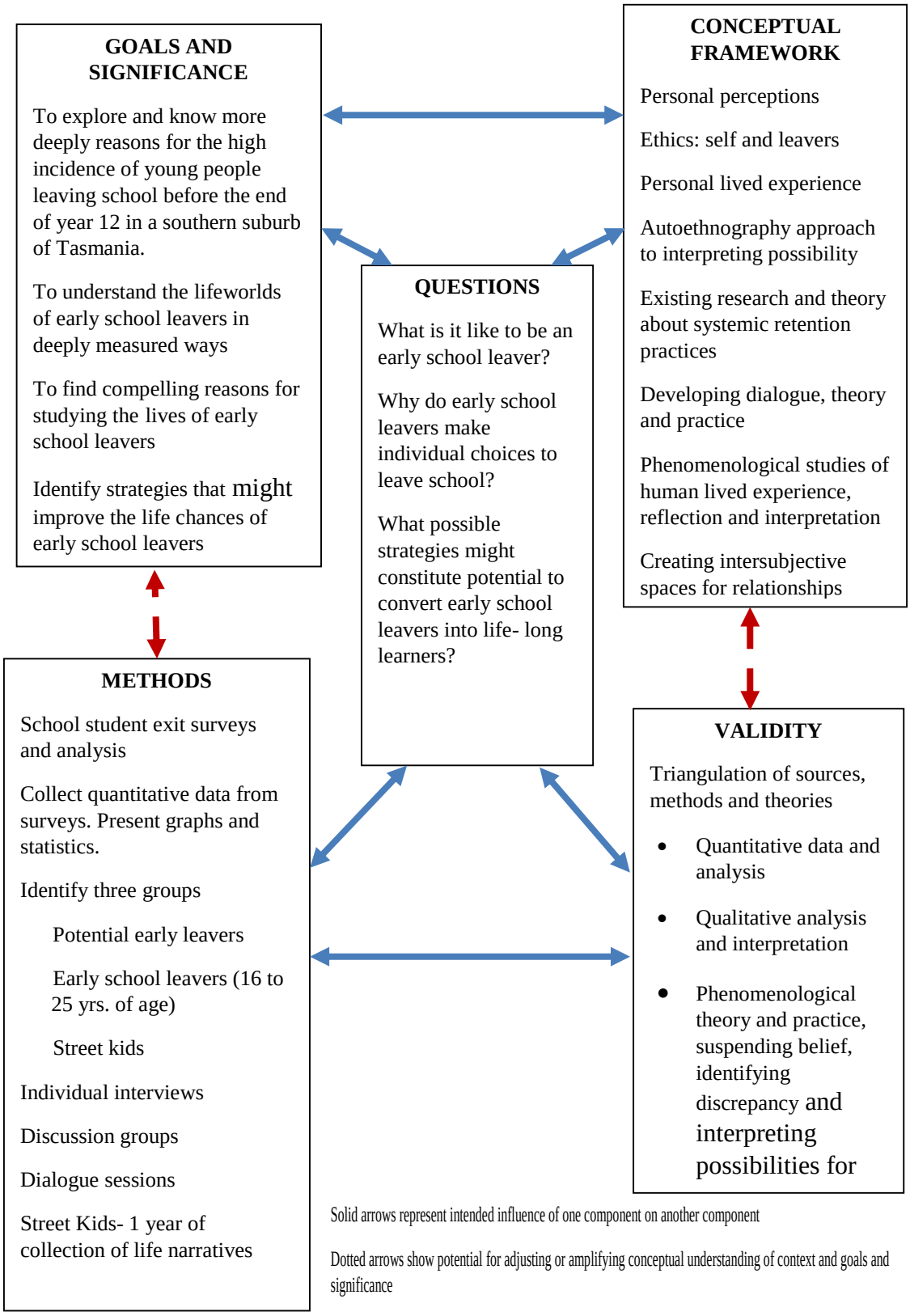
And so I came to develop, in a way that unfolded, as does time over a number of years of inquiring, a design for the conceptual framework and contexts of my thesis following the work of Joseph Maxwell in developing a model for qualitative research and design. I had to find out through my processes of inquiry the underlying schemes that would govern the functioning, developing and unfolding, and the arrangements of detail

that would bring me to explain, profess and advocate compelling, and even more compelling reasons for further research that would illuminate the lifeworlds of early school leavers and contribute in some ways to alleviating their pain, disturbance and alienation with hope for a more flourishing life than they think might have already been promised them Figure 1. therefore, re-presents the conceptual design for my thesis.

This first chapter of my thesis has indicated how I place my own lived experience in my role as curious observer of lives, researcher, onlooker, reflector in action, and in particular, my researcher role as commentator upon the lived experience of early school leavers as well as the ways in which a conceptual framework emerged and evolved over several years of research, inquiry, narration, dialogue-making and deep reflection.

In chapter two I begin to orient myself to the phenomenon of early leavers and the phenomenological approach to knowing. This helped me to understand the need for mutual trust when obtaining research data via dialogue.

Figure 1. Emerging Conceptual Framework One



Solid arrows represent intended influence of one component on another component

Dotted arrows show potential for adjusting or amplifying conceptual understanding of context and goals and significance

Chapter three explains how the survey instrument evolved and why I decided to mix the quantitative data obtained with the qualitative data from the interviews. Having developed the survey instrument, I indicate in chapter four how I use four authors to obtain a clearer concept of the living experience of the young people with whom I would hold dialogue.

As I began to analyse the surveys and re-read the interviews and discussion responses, there were a number of aspects of the lived experiences of early school leavers that unfolded before me. Chapters five and six indicate how the research revealed at least seventeen different underlying themes that I began to realise would be better analysed if gathered under a research topic that best suited the undercurrent within each theme. For instance, when talking to the early school leavers about family it was impossible not to listen to the family's school connections, or lack of them. The four topics chosen to portray the seventeen themes are family, school, attitude and behaviour, and responsibilities.

The stories of each interviewee become enlightening and revealing, telling me more than I could discover by surveys and observation. The revelation of their inner self became a privilege for me and at the same time heightened my concern for their well-being and future. As Richard Kearney says in *On Stories* (2002), "Telling stories is as basic to human beings as eating. More so, in fact, for while food makes us live, stories are what make our lives worth living. They are what make our condition human" (p.2). Each of the early school leavers I interview has a story to tell, as "…each human life is always already an implicit story" (p.129).

The ELSS data and interviews reveal the story behind early school leavers and students in general. In chapters seven and eight I discover differences between an intended and un-attended curriculum, an implemented and attained curriculum and one

that is implemented and unattained. I unfold gradually compounding affects in the lives of young people that keep them from meeting expected school achievement standards on a regular basis so that they eventually lose motivation for learning and turn their backs on education's and society's expectations. I discover what I have long expected from observing students' mimicry of teachers during my teaching years— students observe teachers acutely and intelligently, they analyse and characterise them, and they are very good at discerning between a 'good' teacher and a 'bad' teacher.

As stories unfold, I gain insight into the early patterns of their lives and the possible compounding affect that positive and negative school experiences have on young people's decisions to remain, leave or re-engage at a later time. I find patterns of fear, compounding behaviour, absenteeism, lack of family support and motivation. I reveal various levels of connection in student-teacher relationships that persuade students to remain at or leave school. I survey aspects of contemporary society that help me examine first, the influence that the stress of part-time work has on being a student, and next, the health and welfare of students who are now experiencing a society where illicit and licit substances are available.

I examine the responses from the surveys and consider the life experiences shared with me by the members of three discussion groups. The collected data and discussions offer me a much clearer insight into the minds of potential early school leavers than I ever had.

In the final chapter I reveal how we can re-stoke the fires of interest and introduce new possibilities for those on the verge of becoming early school leavers. I have presented the data I collected in various forms. For example, graphs, tables and figures portray the situation of early school leavers within the suburban area of the research from the personal views of 14 to 19 year olds. Short life stories told by participants about one

aspect, or more, of their lives that was pressing on their decision to stay at school or not, illuminate and support the portrayal that the graphics, tables and figures suggest. Cartoon strips visually represent the factors that a student may face in just one day at school to reveal what might be hidden from both teachers and those who are school outsiders. There are descriptions of ways I tried, within a short period of time, to help street kids develop life skills to find employment.

But as van Manen says, “It is in the act of reading and writing that insights emerge” (van Manen, 2006, p. 715) The writing of this thesis involves developing textual material like the above that possesses interpretive significance, that is, I develop texts to which I can give meaning from the insight I gain from my evolving understandings. My insights are gained not only in participation in the research but also in writing and representing its data and through questioning, re-questioning and deepening the questioning that unfolds with the data as I write it and interpret it. It is in the phenomenological sense, following van Manen, that “the research produces knowledge in the form of texts that not only describe and analyse phenomena of the lifeworld but also evoke understandings that otherwise lie beyond their reach” (p.715). The understandings that lie beyond the reach of the data of my research are those that lie in the trustworthiness and veracity of what I can bring to unfolding my closing discussion of what a moment of conversion might be in the lives of the young people of my inquiry whom we lose from school or are at risk of losing.

Chapter Two

Preparing for asking which and why students leave school early

*I left school in year 10 because I had been in trouble with both the school and the police. When I was younger, I was caught chroming and spraying graffiti around the town. (**Patrick**, unemployed, 17 years old)*

*I was not very good at school until I was offered subjects in the practical areas of woodwork and metalwork when I reached years 9 and 10. At this point, my teachers found I had an innate skill for all manual tasks. The work I produced was far above the standards of other students in my year level, so I left school to get a job. (**Neale**, 17 years old)*

*My father made me leave school at the end of year 11. My parents were trying to arrange for me to go back to their former country and stay with my aunt and uncle. My parents believed it was better if I was married to someone from their former country. (**Tonia**, 17 years old)*

Because of the literature's informative value and the fact that I believed my research should be more than just a gathering of statistics, I needed to discover more about the philosophical reasoning behind my motivation and attitude to this topic. I also needed to find out what had been already written in Australia and overseas on this topic and the effect of external factors on the responses of young people.

My initial reading followed my interest to develop a strong background in philosophy and research techniques. It gave me some foundation in philosophical and technical background for formulating ideas for inquiry, in ways I had never before

experienced. In colloquia with fellow students I tested out questions and ideas and gained some deeper understanding for setting my inquiry in train. I found myself amongst the works and ideas of Gadamer (1975), David Labaree (2003), Timo Maran (2003), Bohm (2004) and Freire (2001). The last author has had an impact on my understanding of pedagogy, dialogue and philosophies of student identity.

A concurrent category of reading in which I immersed myself is one that focused my thoughts toward an understanding of what school structures or school systems have been installed to assist students who wished to leave school early. I also concentrated on what information had been gathered by researchers and how teaching techniques or pedagogy could assist with the problem of early school leavers. My selection of literature in this category was biased towards discerning educational implications in particular and towards those perspectives of the parents, students and teachers towards school structures and systems. Focussing upon this category for questioning allowed me a closer look at what has happened, what is happening and what has been suggested for the future in the general field of education of students who could be classified as at risk of leaving prior to the completion of year 12 or, as some American literature calls it, the "drop out" problem. This literature has provided background material on teacher education and ideas for education systems by authors such as Richard Slaughter (2000), John Ainley (2001), Craig Campbell and Geoffrey Sherington (2002), Kristina Faust-Horn (2003), and David Hargreaves (2004). From a student perspective Kitty te Riele's (2004) work is most encouraging and focused. From a parent perspective the works of Ivan Snook (2003) and Laura Blow, Alissa Goodman, Ian Walker, and Frank Windmeijer (2005) have been helpful.

While reading the literature I noticed some terms varied from State to State in Australia, for example the use of "non-completion" in terms of early school leavers. In

this thesis, “non-completion” refers to the numbers of young people who do not complete year 12. It includes the young people who do not continue at secondary school beyond year 10 and year 11, as well as those who leave during year 12 without obtaining a year 12 certificate (S. Lamb, Dwyer, & Wyn, 2000). In this thesis, I am concerned not with the experience of non-completion, but with that of the lived experience of early school leavers.

A third category of literature has enabled a more focused understanding of my study and where my interests lie. I have been able to obtain information on what has occurred so far and where my thesis may fit into an overall picture. This literature has been, deliberately, mostly Australian based. There have, however, been some interesting research data and reports from both the United Kingdom and United States of America that might have influenced the insights I gained. The reason for the Australian bias is because my research will be focused on the northern suburbs of Hobart and will, therefore, generally not have the same causes or reasons as those completed with a group of students in a study from Chicago. For instance, Michelle Fine’s work focussed on studies of African-American students, and Muslim children and the ethnography of 25-35 year-old adults which are not as relevant to the socio-economic culture of the suburb of my study. The authors who have assisted me greatly are Eivers, Ryan and Brinkley (2000), Hargreaves, David Zyngier (2004), Lamb, te Riele and Stephen Crump (2003), Adena Klem and James Connell (2004). As the third category relates to the main focus of my study a more comparative and in-depth look at the literature being presented has been undertaken.

The review of literature on early school leavers was focused on pedagogy and teacher training, a remedial approach to the problem of early school leavers through

motivation and behavioural management (improvement) and the reasons, causes and effects of leaving school early.

Pedagogy and Teacher Training

Hargreaves' (2004) approach is to look at effective teaching and a more personalised approach to teaching through the use of technology in our pedagogy.

> So what's new? Whilst it is true that teachers actively design their teaching to meet the needs of students, it is recognised that that they are not entirely successful in this and that some needs of some students sometimes go unmet. The new challenge is this: can more be done to meet the learning needs of *all* students. (p. 1)

Hargreaves stresses that students need to be in an equal partnership with teachers for learning to be effective and lists nine gateways developed with school leaders to attain a personalised approach to learning.

> … it emerged that there are nine main gateways, each of which provides a distinctive angle on personalising learning by ensuring that teaching and support are shaped around student needs. The nine gateways are: Curriculum, Advice and guidance, Assessment for learning, Learning to learn, School organisation and design, Workforce development, New technologies (ICT), Mentoring and Student voice. (p.2)

Klem and Connell (2004) write that the conditions for success are focused on good teaching and the classroom learning environment, "Conditions include high standards for academic learning and conduct, meaningful and engaging pedagogy and curriculum, professional learning communities among staff and personalized learning

environments" (p. 262). Klem and Connell's remedial approach is based on literature on early school leavers [(Lee & Croninger, 2001) (Finn & Rock, 1997)] that is focused around overcoming 'the problem', that is, the problem of young people leaving school before the expected completion dates.

Home and school

Faust-Horn (2003) writes about better home-school collaboration as a means of overcoming early school leavers and links this with the perceptions held by parents and the expectations of parents, "The partnership between home and school can impact a student's years, behavior within the classroom, attendance, test scores, and self-esteem. Home and school have traditionally been viewed as two separate systems..." (Faust-Horne, 2003, p. 5).

Zyngier (2007) compares our current systems to "doing time" and says better program development and implementation needs to occur as poor programs lead to student disengagement.

> It is claimed by their teachers that over a period of time some young people become alienated from education and from their schools. This is too often equated with disengagement. While this disengagement might be seen as a problem of the individual student in terms of dropping out or problematic behaviour at school, it can also more appropriately be seen in terms of the school failing to enable the student to achieve their potential. (Zyngier, 2007, p. 1767)

A further group of authors not only write about possible solutions but focus on the early warning signs and what may be generalised as the main characteristics of early school leavers. Eivers, Ryan and Brinkley (2000) take a close look at the characteristics of early

school leavers, their classification, the consequences and the extent of early school leaving in the Republic of Ireland.

> The composition of a school's enrolment (in terms of social background) can have an effect on achievement and drop-out rates. Where schools have an enrolment that is predominantly disadvantaged, pupils tend to do worse academically, and to have higher drop-out rates than would be predicted from analysis of pupil characteristics at an individual level. (Eivers et al., 2000, p. 12)

Snapshot of the research suburb: Income, expectations and training

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has released general statistics on population age, incomes, education attainment levels, employment, family structure and government assistance for all regions of Australia and for the suburban/local government regions of Tasmania for the year 2007. From these statistics I found that for the local government area in which my ELSS was conducted, and from which suburb the young people in the three discussion groups came, had the following numbers. The residential population in 2014 was estimated at 45,382 of these 32.6 per cent were below the age of 24 years. There were a further 23.2 per cent over the retirement age of 65 years and the average taxable income for the area was $A41,479 compared to the average taxable income for the state of $A43,520 and two other suburban areas of Hobart with similar population sizes and structure of $A46,422 and $A50,431 (ABS, 2014b).

Within the selected suburban area of the study there were 11,545 families, of these, 4146 are couple families with no children, 2619 single parent families who have children and 4538 were couple families with children. There were 3,593 primary students and 2,506 secondary students within the suburban area of the ELSS and approximately 12,700 people received some form of Federal Government financial assistance (ABS,

2011a, p. 15). There were 1323 students who were in receipt of a Youth Allowance, a special Federal Government allowance for low income families, and 1620 people received single parenting payments from the Federal Government (ABS, 2010b).

The 2009 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census data indicates the diversity of young people in the suburb in social, economic and cultural terms:

> 17.7 per cent of the suburb's population was aged 12-24 years
>
> 46.7 per cent of the Aboriginal community being under 18 years of age
>
> 20.3 per cent of young people (1,677) 15 to 24 year olds were unemployed
>
> 549 young people in this suburb were in receipt of the Young Homeless Allowance (the second highest in Tasmania)
>
> 3927 young people were receiving Centrelink payments
>
> A school retention rate of 55.4 per cent compared to the State average of 62.1 per cent (ABS, 2010b)

From the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006) Census, for this particular suburb, the indicated highest educational attainment levels attested to on the Census document and for all ages over 15 years, 9080 people had completed year 12 or equivalent, 2979 had completed year 11 or equivalent, 12005 had completed year 10, 3707 had completed year 9, 3183 had completed year 8 and 178 had not been to a secondary school. Approximately 6600 had a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) certificate and 3600 had a diploma or higher tertiary qualification (ABS, 2006). These statistics are summarised in Table 1(below).

In the late 1990s and early 2000s the Federal and State Governments financed a number of schemes to try to improve school retention rate and it is possible that these had an influence on the change in year 12 attainment level. Some of the initiatives include the Job Placement, Employment and Training Program (1997), Youth Social Justice Package

for Young Australians (1998), Youth Pathways Action Plan (2000) and the National Strategy for Young Australians (2005).

Table 1. Number and percentage of the research suburb population over 15 years of age attaining various education levels

Number	Highest Education level attained	Percentage
178	Primary level (Below year 7)	0.4
3183	Year 8	7.7
3707	Year 9	9.0
12005	Year 10 (approx. 16 years old)	29.0
2979	Year 11	7.2
9080	Year 12	22.0
6600	Technical certificates (trades)	16.0
3600	Diploma or above	8.7
41332	**TOTAL**	**100.0**

It is also possible that the change in participation was due to the establishment of a senior secondary college in the area which has increased student accessibility to higher levels of education and a more diverse range of study opportunities. A further possibility may be that the young members of this suburb are now reaching year 12 as part of their education journey and the population is less likely to move from their current residences. Training and education courses provided by the establishment of the senior secondary college included apprenticeship courses and in-school traineeship opportunities along with academic subjects preparing students for further education, all of which may have offered incentive to stay at school until the end of year 12. Unfortunately, statistics were

not available to support any of these suppositions and therefore I cannot provide a concrete reason for the increase.

Unemployment

Eivers, Ryan and Brinkley (2000) tracked 'drop-outs' and asked the question, is this problem of early school leavers a modern problem or a problem that has continued in society for many years and is only now being studied? Eivers et al. (2000) also compared results from those who left and those students who stayed on at school until they had gained formal qualifications.

> Compared to those who leave school with a qualification, early school leavers are more likely to be unemployed, to be unemployed for longer periods, to earn less and to be more likely to be among those living below the poverty line. (p.6)

Behaviour

The work completed by Eivers, et al. (2000) had a component of questionnaires which were sent to the primary and post-primary teachers of a group identified as early school leavers. Some of the responses were based on retrospective understanding of what characteristics the early school leavers had in primary and post-primary schools. The list of characteristics Eivers et al. asked teachers to comment on included classroom behaviour, aggressive behaviour, interaction with others and other characteristics such as leadership qualities, involvement in sport, being bullied by others and critical thinking.

Absence

Eivers et al. also obtained information on success in school subjects and attendance details for their group of early leavers from both the primary schools and post-primary schools. From junior-infant days absent were thirty-two days to thirty-nine days in senior infants. The study went on to indicate that early post-primary absenteeism

dropped to eighteen days but rose to forty two days by the time early school leavers were in 6th class (year 12) (p.106).

Pedagogy

te Riele (2000) writes about her experience with a school in New South Wales and the curriculum and pedagogy which is important to the structure of the school.

> The approach to teaching is more cooperative and student centred and a personalised relationship between staff and students is emphasised. This is evidenced by a supportive rather than punitive disciplinary approach and an emphasis on students' autonomy and mature responsibility. (p. 21)

In another paper, *Challenging Assumptions of Linearity and Choice*, te Riele (2004a) presents more information on the effect of successful teaching and learning but also looks at the effect of marginalisation of young women as one of their main reasons for becoming an early school leaver.

> Successful teaching and learning for Jane, Michelle, and their peers, relied on a recognition in the Senior Colleges of the human dimension of schooling – both in the relationship of individual teachers with students and in the culture of the school as a whole – rather than on 'effective teaching' techniques. (p. 16)

Needs

Since the mid-1980s there have been a number of Australian studies on early school leavers, and the factors affecting the decision to leave school before the end of year 12. Some who have influenced my research include Elizabeth Holden, Dwyer, Lamb, Johanna Wyn, te Riele and institutions including the Centre for Youth Studies at Melbourne University, the Youth Research Centre and the Dusseldorp Foundation in

Sydney. There have been other people and institutions such as the National Centre for Vocational Education Research, the Australian Council for Educational Research and Mission Australia that have also contributed much to the research and discussion on marginalised youth and early school leavers.

> For many years now, and particularly since 1989, the staff of the Youth Research Centre have devoted much of their work to a process of review, consultation and program development relating to the needs of early school leavers (Dwyer & Youth Research Centre, 1996, p. 1).

Studies on early school leaving have been completed in many western countries. As mentioned earlier, my reading included research material from the Republic of Ireland (Cosgrove, 2005; Eivers et al., 2000), the United States of America (Juvonen, Le, Kaganoff, Augustine, & Constant, 2004; Labarre, 2004), the United Kingdom (Archambault, 2008; Hargreaves, 2004) and the European countries (Admiraal & Swart, 2011; Magnusen & European Cultural Foundation., 1977; Rosier, 1978).

Before preparing my own research and the questions involved in the ELSS, I read studies from Europe and in particular the United Kingdom, the United States of America and Australia. I examined the research which had already been done in Tasmania, research such as *Early School Leaving in Tasmania: Origins and Outcomes* (S. Lamb, 2001). This report set out to present information on early school leaving in Tasmania derived from the survey of the year 10 cohort of 2001. It looked at the reasons young people leave school early and what happens to them in their first post–school year.

Dwyer's (1996) study in Devonport, a major population centre in this rural area of approximately 25,000 people, has provided information on this localised problem which was also helpful in the formation of my own research (Dwyer & Youth Research Centre,

1996). My research was based in a particular suburb of the southern region of the State. As mentioned above (p. 26) my reason for selecting this area was because the problems associated with this area in regard to young people were very similar to those problems found in the western/north-western region. However, while Dwyer's study was set in a provincial/rural city, the suburb I was looking at was set in among other suburbs of the capital, Hobart, with a population of approximately 44,000. The local industries had reduced employment numbers or had become more technical in their production methods. There is also a high degree of youth unemployment.

Returning

Current and future students might understand possibilities for new programs or changes in teaching methods or attitudes that might attract them back into learning. Families may fear pressure exerted from authoritative figures or groups over the performance or presence of their son or daughter at school. Instead families could begin to enjoy the side effect of 'achievement satisfaction'— they may hear positive responses from teachers and schools about their sons or daughters achieving. In fact, some could be more amicable because their children are satisfied with what they are doing at school.

Classroom disruption

There are two classroom disturbances that generally frustrate teachers. In *Tools for teaching*, Frederic Jones (2007) supports that "Teachers in typical classrooms lose approximately 50 per cent of their instructional time because students are off task or otherwise disturbing the teacher or other class members" (p. 252)

Most teachers would agree that activities that have little or nothing to do with learning take up a portion of teaching time. Activities such as roll call, disciplinary

issues and interruptions by announcements coming over a public address system and dealing with student problems, all of which consume time that they would prefer to devote to teaching and learning. Teachers lament time taken away from those students who want to try to do well. New programs and new changes in teaching practice and attitudes might restore time lost. Should teachers become my readers, I would aspire to help them gain more understanding about the lived experience of their students through the students' opinions, narratives and conversations I record. My hope is they then fold their understanding into their pedagogy to inspire students to stay at school.

When the time comes for counsellors and educational authorities to recommend to parents that a student leave school, a costly and confrontational event arises. If the behaviour of a student is deemed serious enough for he or she to be excluded from class or from a school, the procedures may often alienate students and their parents from the education system. Exclusion is a stressful and distressing experience for all concerned. One of the aims of my research is to influence the level of stress, by reducing the numbers of students reaching this stage of being excluded. Time and money saved might be used elsewhere within the school to establish programs to support and re-engage students with social, emotional and behavioural needs. Is the curriculum the school or the local education system currently offers too focussed on university entrance or VET qualifications? Another aspiration for my research is for schools and systems to offer different subject choices attractive to the early school leavers of this 21st century.

te Riele and Engaging support for re-engaging

There has been research completed on giving early school leavers a 'second chance'. Mark McFadden and Geoff Munns (2000) and te Reile (2000) have been prominent in advocacy for finding ways to encourage early leavers back into the school system.

McFadden and Munns (pp.59-73) argue that there is resistance by young people to what they believe are oppressive social relations that exist in schools. Each early school leaver rejects education and makes a choice to turn their back on formal education as a way of improving their financial position or their social standing. Some early school leavers saw the rejection of secondary schooling not as an end but as a break between their culture and school culture. Some school leavers will take an opportunity to re-join the education process at some level. The level they choose will depend on the individual (McFadden & Munns, 2002, p. 68).

In her study on re-engagement, te Reile (2000) looks at two schools in particular, for anonymity, she named Sapphire and Ruby. She discusses the programs schools were offering them to encourage re-engagement.

> Sapphire Senior College offers a year 10 program aimed specifically at older students who have been out of education for some time, as well as one for 16 to 17 year old students, as part of the Federal Government Full Service Program. Ruby Senior College also has a Full Service year 10 program. Both Colleges run some 'bridging' style courses in literacy, numeracy or English language skills as well (p. 13).

I believe there is hope in promoting this concept of re-engaging early school leavers in the education process at some stage later in their lives. I believe that many groups of people, who are involved with early leavers in some way, might gain some understanding from my research and learn how to support young people when the time comes for them to choose to re-engage in learning.

te Riele (2000) has written on the problem of early school leavers and associated social links in Australia. In one thesis, *"The best thing I've ever done": Second Chance Education For Early School Leavers,* she gives strong reasons why it is important to

complete year 12 and presents her findings and statistics on early school leavers in Australia. Further, te Riele writes about the need to re-engage early school leavers by offering alternative programs after they have left school and to think about what they may have missed out on, causing them to re-enter education.

> More importantly, the research findings suggest that detours, opportunities to reverse decisions and redefine possibilities, and the option to return to education at a later stage, proved to be more worthwhile than a linear pathway. Gaining valuable life experiences improved people's maturity and their motivation to study (p. 4).

The overall concern of having a well-educated youth is not a problem specific to developed economies. With an increase in technology and the growth of the manufacturing industry in the second and third world countries there is an economic imperative to have young people fully trained into either an academic pathway or a pathway based around services such as trades or retail.

What happens though when early school leavers depart and do not become reengaged?

They suffer unemployment

Young people who complete senior secondary education are less likely than early school leavers to be unemployed or employed in casual or 'dead-end' jobs. Nevertheless, in Australia around a quarter of the 15 to 19 age group continues to leave school without a senior high school qualification. Early school leavers tend to be drawn in

unrepresentatively large numbers from young people of low socio-economic background, government schools, rural areas, boys and aboriginal backgrounds (te Riele, 2000). te Riele's argument would appear to be that there is not one reason but perhaps different combinations from a potential list of reasons. The same thesis presents arguments for strong student-teacher relations, a relevant curriculum and dealing with early alienation from schooling.

European research indicates that the percentage of 15 to 24 year olds who were not in employment, education or training to be 12.9 per cent, or approximately 7.5 million (Eurofound, 2012, p. 23). Australian research also highlights that at any point in time there are at least 40,000 young people in Australia aged 15 to 19 who, having left school early, are not in some other form of education or training and are employed for less than fifteen hours a week, usually in low skilled and casual roles. The impact of twelve years education and training on the employability of an individual cannot be underestimated (ABS, 2010a). Unemployment data indicated that seven years after leaving school only 7 per cent of all year 12 leavers were unemployed. By comparison, young men who had left school in year 9 had a significantly higher level of unemployment, 21 per cent, after the same period. For women it was even worse at 59 per cent unemployment (Business Council of Australia, 2003).

Their skills atrophy

In Australia the less skilled jobs are few and have declined over the past forty years. Information and communication technologies are transforming the composition of labour demand. The source of this change appears to be both from ITC-low skilled labour substitution as well as through complementarities with high skilled labour (Kelly & Lewis, 2001, p. 12).

The Australian Government has attempted to do something about the problem of youth unemployment. Government interest and concern for social problems involving the unemployed or unemployable had increased to the point where educational investment was a major issue in an effort to alleviate further problems in the future. The risk associated with entering a labour market containing high levels of teenage unemployment and comparatively few full-time work opportunities for those without qualification were not enough to outweigh the school, family and regional factors which contribute to non-completion (S. Lamb, Long, & Baldwin, 2004).

According to John Smyth and Robert Hattam (2004) there has been a generational shift toward recognising that young people today have a multi-dimensional lifestyle, a lifestyle which is much different to that of their parents. Further, Smyth and Hattam suggest that young people are, to some degree, involved in the process of self-determination, unlike their parents who often had little say in what they should do at school, in society and at home. We should not accept the idea that all young people have identical experiences.

> Students, in effect, policed themselves by deciding that they didn't have what it took, and therefore had no choice but to leave school. Sometimes this self-policing took the form of students making the normalizing judgement that they were not as smart as their friends…(Smyth., Hattam., & (with Cannon. Edwards. Wilson. Wurst.), 2004, p. 149).

Part-time work becomes their only option like that of their peers. To reach their potential and self-expectations, young people need to be prepared for a rapidly changing world. This world, since the Global Financial crisis of 2008, is a world where work is a combination of part-time work in a variety of jobs which are more complex and

challenging, requiring different skills from the past, and where they may have two or three part-time jobs in order to piece together a liveable income. The table below compares the decrease in full-time employment, the rise in part-time employment and the unemployment rate for all young people between 15 and 24 years of age who are not attending full time education. The figures were obtained from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2014a).

Table 2: An annual comparison of 15-24 year-old people who are not in full-time education

	Full-time employment	Part-time employment	Unemployed
February Year	(,000)	(,000)	(,000)
2008	1032.8	265.3	111.9
2009	969.9	298.8	158
2010	930.2	316.5	157.3
2011	927.3	284.6	162.7
2012	922.8	294.4	161.3
2013	875.8	310.0	162.6
2014	824.3	327.8	166.1

Unemployment, low-employment, low entry to training and low level or inappropriate counselling suggests strongly that any skills achieved and not practised might atrophy, thus risking further young people's future chances of engaging in the health and wealth of society.

In 2009 the Federal Government changed the expectations for young people receiving youth allowance, in particular the changes affected early school leavers by requiring them to fulfil one of a number of criteria if they wished to continue to receive youth allowance (DEEWR, 2012). One of these criteria encouraged the early school leaver to remain in education or training until they were 17 years of age. When an early school leaver first applies for the youth allowance they undertake interviews and

questionnaires. These are used to check their suitability for education and or training and any remedial assistance which may be required. Apart from that provided by some charitable groups (e.g. Boys Town) and the work of youth counsellors employed by local government groups, there is very little counselling done to find out why young people wanted to leave school in the first place.

What literature is not telling us enough about: An enduring paradox

My energy for inquiry comes from where I see an enduring paradox—there is a contradiction between a well-intentioned education system and a situation where some students leave it without apparently gaining much benefit from it. I have followed other researchers, both in Australia and internationally, including Wilfried Admiraal and Jose Swart (2011), Nigel Bagnall (2005), Laura Blow, Alissa Goodman, Ian Walker, Frank Windmeijer (2005), Stephen Lamb, Phillip McKenzie and Australian Council for Educational Research (2001) and Peter Dwyer, Bruce Wilson and Johanna Wyn (1985).

Here I acknowledge there that have been many attempts to reason out why students don't engage and won't re-engage, what the factors are that characterise such students, and identify the fundamental inequities that might contribute to the problem of early school leaving. Before I finish this chapter though I wish to point out that I have found more possibilities for research as compelling for continuing to deepen our understanding of disengagement, characteristics that might generalise or "normalise" unjustly the young people themselves and the inequities that might be contributing to where they find themselves as early school leavers.

In the United States of America discussion has been established on teaching methods, classroom presentation and why some students become disengaged while others remain focused (Murphy, Beck, Crawford, Hodges, & McGaughy, 2001). Leaving

school before the completion of year 12 is thought to be a gradual disengagement from learning and alienation from education as an institution. One of the more persistent problems of Dutch senior general secondary education includes underachievement as well as learning, behavioural, and emotional difficulties that eventually lead to school dropout for many students (Admiraal & Swart, 2011).

The early school leaver appears to be characterised by a cycle of lateness to class, avoidance of class or tasks, fake illnesses, falling academic assessments, poor behaviour, suspensions, and forced movement between schools. Nevertheless, even among students who finish the required years of schooling, some research has found high rates of boredom, alienation, and disconnection with schooling (Juvonen et al., 2004). American, John Goodlad (1984), an early researcher into school 'drop outs', refers to a situation where studies have characterised high school students, in particular, as bored, staring out classroom windows, counting the seconds for the bell to ring, and pervasively disengaging from the learning process (Goodlad, 1984). This opinion of why some groups are disengaged and others, on the same task, are fully attentive is also characterised in more recent literature. For instance, Mary-Helen Immordino-Yang and Vanessa Singh draw this picture.

> We begin with a familiar scenario: a group of high school students are sitting in a computer classroom. Some are slumped over their desks or staring aimlessly out of the window. Others, though, appear to be highly engaged in the task, working in pairs or alone and obviously absorbed in the digital environment. What accounts for the differences between these groups? How is it that some students may find a digital learning environment engaging and useful, while others may wonder, why am I doing this? (p. 234)

Students do not experience alienation and disconnection during all learning experiences. Certain conditions may promote excitement, stimulation, and engagement in learning, say Suzanne Hidi and Judith Harackiewicz (2000).

> … in each other's absence, individual and situational interest may have even more critical roles. For example, individual interest in a particular topic may help students persevere through boring presentations or texts about that topic, and situational interest elicited by presentations or texts may maintain motivation and performance when individuals have no personal interest in particular topics. (p. 155)

Discussion of the early school leaver problem and educational outcomes occurred in Federal and State parliaments, in the media and at education meetings as indicated by the following report from the Australian House of Representatives. For example,

> … the challenges of the classroom are becoming increasingly difficult. Social and economic change has impacted on societal expectations, student needs and attitudes, retention rates and educational policies and programs… Along with socio-economic factors, location and indigeneity, gender has figured significantly in the differing educational outcomes (Australian House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training, 2002).

Notwithstanding the valuable contributions of the research by others I have so far introduced, I came to view something missing and wished to view the problem from another and different perspective. My inquiry into the literature reinforced my desire towards deepening my understanding of the problems early school leavers face as I strived to seek ways through my inquiry to assist them.

My insight through the surveys, questionnaires, discussion and dialogues told me that the lifestyle of early school leavers, that is, their world outside school, becomes more about self and "mates" than about purposeful engagement in society. My abiding intention became to find ways to hear their expressions of how they were living and to understand their lives outside school.

How then as I proceeded would I come to view the problem of early school leavers? Is it viewed as an individual problem, or as an institutional/societal problem (Bacchi, 2009)? The framing and conceptualizing of the problem of early school leavers determines the strategies and interventions to solve the problem. In Finland the emphasis is on prevention and intervention before the problem of early school leaving occurs (Oomen & Plant, 2014). They refer to the work of Belgium's Paulus Smeyers and Marc Depaepe (2006) which offer the perspective of non-school causes of early school leavers. Perhaps the focus should not so much be on dropping out as a problem of perceived or actual failures of pupils, schools and the costs associated to it, but on dropout as an indication and origin of fundamental inequities (Oomen & Plant, 2014)

I wanted my research to focus on the early school leavers themselves, not to apportion 'blame' to either, schools, society nor the students themselves. I wanted to listen to the early school leavers' life stories, what they saw as their lived experience.

> The voice of early school leavers is important for several reasons. Students are able to offer expertise about educational issues because of their profound, lived knowledge of school and TAFE. Much research points to students' ability to abstract and generalise from their experiences and arrive at insightful conclusions (Kane & Maw, 2005).

My research evolved to reflect upon, interpret and understand the life stories the young people come to tell me during my inquiry and the part relationships played in their decision to leave school early. The discussion groups re-told their school, home and social relationships while the street kids I got to work with, and spend a year with, had a different perspective on relationships and how they developed their own community of support. This extended inquiry of mine would add value to the research I identified above and become, I hoped, an important contribution to the field of study of early school leavers and provide incentives for further research and inquiry. I have already emphasised the validity of my own lived experience as autobiographic material for sharing with the young people I encountered and developing their confidence for expressing their individual and equally valuable and valid experience for understanding.

Further, like Yvonne Sliep in her article, 'We compose our own requiem: An auto- ethnographic study of mourning', in *Creative Approaches to Research* which is "a trans-disciplinary journal for creative research and reflects the convergences between epistemology, pedagogy and technology".

> I add my voice to others who advocate that a social scientist who has lived through an experience can make a strong contribution to the field studied while reducing the risk of silencing the representation of groups studies in that field (Ellis, 1991; Clandinin & Connely, 1994; Clough, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, Wall, 2006) (Sliep, 2012, p. 84).

Chapter three

The survey instrument

Barbara left school in year 11 to go to Sydney with her boyfriend Colin, after a year in Sydney they both returned to Hobart but were finding it difficult to get a job. They had tried living with Barbara's parents to save money, but Colin did not get on well with her father. Colin had left school to join the army, after completing his basic training, he wanted to try to become an officer. His education levels were not considered good enough so he had left the army and was now trying to find work.

Orienting to the phenomenon of early leavers

What I really wanted to know and understand as an educator-researcher is firm reasons for early leavers having left school before it is generally considered to be too soon. I wondered whether these young people could offer me the substance that lies in and behind the reasons why students leave school early. I wanted to hear more than the brief and deft answers they would throw to teachers, including me, as they were leaving our classrooms and we were left with empty answers to "Why?" For me, the topic, early school leavers, has become a phenomenon that has drawn my inquiry from within me and into interpreting possibilities for understanding the lived experiences of the young people within the socio-cultural traditions of their lives that colour their regard for school. I hoped that developing understandings of the lived experience of early leavers, that I could involve in the research might help me develop a program of action, especially concerning my role in teacher training. I hoped I could influence teacher and community

perceptions that could seriously reduce the number of students who drop out of school and are likely to enter a cycle of unemployment.

There is something essential that I wished to understand through connecting and speaking with early leavers themselves. My topic for my research comes from what van Manen (1990) suggests we do when we inquire into human lived experience. I asked, "What human experience do I feel called upon to make topical for my investigation" (p.41). My inquiry "is determined by the questioning of the essential nature of lived experience; a certain way of being in the world" (van Manen, 1990, p. 39). In my thesis, the research is into the certain way of being in the world that early leavers experience. Understanding the lived experience of early school leavers involves an inquiry that features surveys, conversations, discussions and dialogue, and anecdotes that "make comprehensible" (van Manen, 1990, p. 116) the relations between me, my research participants and the topic of my inquiry. This is the intentionality of my thesis. Following Robert Sokolowski, I intend in writing my thesis to develop a conscious relationship with a deep understanding of early school leavers' decisions when they exit school, when they allow the school doors to close behind them (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 8).

While I have written about my experiences of 45 or 50 years ago I am also aware of any memory bias. At times, I torment myself with uncertainty. Am I misreading my past? Am I altering my past? Paul Ricoeur in, *Critique and Conviction* (1998), when asked by his interviewers to recall some of his early memories (p. 2), willingly does so with the caveat "whether it is actually a recollection, or whether it is a reconstruction on the basis of what I was told, I don't know." He goes on to portray very convincing realities. So what is important in my retelling is not necessarily the accuracy of detail but rather the authenticity and veracity in my telling.

The validity and truthfulness of storytelling were also important in framing my research questions and my work with the small group of former students who are referred to as street kids. Recall or memory bias can be a problem if outcomes being measured require that subjects recall past events. Often a person recalls positive events more than negative ones, especially if the negative events or memories were hurtful. Alternatively, certain subjects may be questioned more vigorously than others, thereby improving their recollections (Li, 2013, p. 249). The essential point I wish to make here is one that Sokolowski makes, "When we act as agents of truth and meaning, we become involved in activities that cannot be adequately treated from a merely empirical point of view." (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 115) With this assertion in mind, I wished to make certain that I would spend quality one-to-one discussion time with the individuals who wanted to share their stories with me. In these discussions I wanted to make it possible to notice more than the verbal responses the interviewee might offer me so as to render them not superficial. When two people encounter one another, dialogue unfolds on several levels. It goes beyond the first level of verbal expression. Nature and tone of words, facial expressions and body language are permitted to communicate what each party might mean and, to some degree, what each might feel emotionally about the topic being discussed. As Anders Lindseth emphasises in *Life as Moving Towards the Other*, for those made vulnerable by society and the systems, ""it is so important to mind their actions and their lives as expressions (cf. Lindseth, 2012). These expressions are full of crucial and important experiences. Even if they might seem odd, they deserve to be recognized and taken seriously" (Lindseth, 2014, p. 16).

As I proceeded with portraying my lived experience, I felt more settled with the orientation toward what I describe above. As a teacher of over thirty-five years and as a school administrator for ten years I also came across students who had been told by

teachers and parents that school was not for them and perhaps they should leave. These students had often found themselves in situations that made school unbearable and something to be avoided or resisted.

From my teaching experience and speaking with the students who labelled themselves as street kids I know that in some cases, because of the curriculum structure, subjects were wrongly selected by students (Blow, Goodman, Walker, & Windmeijer, 2005). This would lead them to either being 'boxed into' an area of study they had no interest in, or no success. This would lead to feelings of inadequacy as the courses became more and more difficult. As an administrator, I found that a large proportion of those students who left during the school year did so because of an accumulation of behavioural problems resulting from boredom and lack of achievement. Repetitive interviews with parents and students usually ended in the family deciding the student should move on and look for work. Richard Teese and Anne Walstab (2002), in a study on comparing Victorian geographical locations of early school leaving refers to the importance of curriculum.

> … if the curriculum is found to be difficult or narrowly focussed on university as a goal, satisfaction with school drops and this will contribute to leaving as soon as possible. Around 20% of Year 10 boys who are high achievers see school as a 'prison' but, among low achievers, over 40% feel this way. For low achievers in small towns and rural areas, the feeling of being incarcerated is even more pronounced. (Teese & Walstab, 2002, pp. 20-21)

The response and actions of teachers played a big part in the approach to my research with the ELSSs — it is a key part of my research area. My research subjects' perception of the teaching ability and approaches to content of the courses presented by these teachers was also important. As Barry Fraser and Darrell Fisher (1983) state,

"Research involving a *person to environment* perspective has shown that students achieve better where there is greater congruence between the actual classroom environment and that preferred by students" (p. 90).

The question to be asked was; 'Are the student and teacher perceptions of what is occurring in the classroom the same or very similar?' Barry Fisher, Barry Fraser and John Creswell (1995) showed that teachers will see themselves, their classroom demeanour and practice differently to the way a student does. Using the instrument called *Questionnaire on Teacher Interaction* (QTI) they reached a number of conclusions among which was the following.

> The value of the QTI was in its capacity to provide the teachers with a picture of their ideal teacher, how they see themselves and how their students see them. These pictures became the focus for the teachers' discussions on one aspect of their teaching behaviours. (p. 15)

A personal contact approach to my research was important as I was dealing with students and families who, generally, already had suspicion or dislike of the educational system that they felt had let them down. Exclusion, repeated frustration and experiences of failure led to a development of self-doubt and a distrust of all education experiences. Often this negative attitude to education is in place (from my experience) by year nine secondary. In Europe, GHK consulting, Anne-Mari Nevala and Jo Hawley (2011) have found that even performance in primary school can be an important factor in the cause of early school leaving (GHK Consulting, Nevala., & Hawley, 2011, p. 43).

A phenomenological approach to knowing

I began with the incidences and coincidences that led to conducting large numbers of surveys amongst year 9 to year 12 students. When I first thought about using a survey instrument to gain students' insights, I approached a number of school principals. One, in particular, who was the senior principal for the area, listened to my ideas and reasons for wanting to run the survey. He immediately phoned the other principals in the area and told them he thought it was a good idea and they should endorse the project. This removed the necessity for ethics approval from my university, although I still wrote to them and explained the situation and they approved the research based on the principals acting for the parents. The principals then arranged for me to meet with their senior staff to explain how I would like the survey to operate and why the pages were colour coded for each year group to distinguish schools and year groups. Some schools allowed me to speak with the students at an assembly to explain why I was requesting their cooperation.

The anticipated intention for my research was to make the surveys and case studies relevant to the lives of students and early school leavers who would participate with me and give feedback to each of the schools involved. I hoped that my reporting back would inspire schools, education systems and the local municipal government to initiate action and change to alleviate some of the problems associated with early school leavers.

It was to become my lived research experience that I engaged in research surveys of student opinions, interviews with a group of early school leavers who responded to advertisements, interviews with a group of local young people who had identified themselves as street kids and a small group of students who were in year 12 but who had family or friends who had left school early.

I was to become engaged in the life worlds of hundreds of students aged between 14 to 19 years. I came to realise that my approach was developing into a phenomenological one. That is, I was engaging in an interpretative study of both my lived experience and those who participated with me in my study. My approach was not a scientific one. Nor was it simply empirical. A phenomenological approach, according to van Manen (2000) "differs from almost every other science in that it attempts to gain insightful descriptions of the way we experience the world pre-reflectively, without taxonomizing, classifying, or abstracting it" (p.9). I found it most helpful to theorise my or my participants' experience in ways that might explain and or express their world. Rather, my interpretive approach in studying lived experience would offer me "the possibility of plausible insights that bring us in more direct contact with the world" (p.9).

Developing tools for inquiry

There were statistics available for the number of students who were leaving school early (see pp. 38-40). But, statistics are not accompanied by explanatory detail or story. I studied a number of surveys and questionnaires presented in other research such as that by Lamb (2001) and Dwyer et al. (1991). I had already designed a questionnaire as an 'exit' document for students who came to me when I was in my administrative position as head of campus and, who, with little notice, said they were leaving. My exit document asked simple questions such as the reason for leaving, whether it was due to financial reasons, pressures within school or their personal life and what the parents had to say about the student leaving school before the end of year 12. Verbal responses I had received before helped me formulate my questions. At the time, I found the students were reluctant to answer any of my questions or to give me reasons for leaving. I sent the exit questionnaire to them a day or two after they had left and without any pressure. I told

the leavers that my reason for doing this was to allow them a "cooling off" period before their departure was notified officially to the school community. I was to contact them to follow-up their decision, giving me a chance to try to dissuade them from leaving based on the reasons they presented.

Some of the final ideas for the questions I included in the ELSS came from discussions with my supervisors and mentors. Their ways of asking me to clarify my aims and objectives for my survey brought to light a number of ideas and questions I was able to use.

At this stage, foremost in my mind was a report by Dwyer and the Youth Research Centre at Melbourne University who investigated links between socio-economic status and student achievement. (Dwyer & Youth Research Centre, 1996) Dwyer discussed a possible relationship between low income and school performance, along with other factors, such as truancy, homelessness, youth unemployment and alienation. This report held important insights for my research given the generally low income status of the suburb I was using for my inquiry. A second report by Michael Brooks, Chris Milne, Karen Paterson, Klas Johansson and Kerry Hart (1997) provided a detailed look at family and its situation as one of the factors affecting early school leavers. Brookes et al. (1997) identify eight main areas under which they list factors they found led to under-age school leaving—continual experiences of academic failure, schools not responsive to student needs, alienating school environment, family conflict or breakdown, low self-esteem, poor student/teacher relationship, disinterest in education and disruptive behaviour (p. 16).

I wanted to recognise the lived experience of the disengaged students and to have some understanding of why they felt the need to leave school early based on their experiences up until the time they made their decision. First, I endeavoured to gain a

clear and proper understanding of mind-mapping in order to capture my ideas that were crowding my thinking and gain clarity for my direction. My first attempt (see Figure 3 p. 84) at brainstorming produced beginning questions, ideas and possible areas which I needed to consider more closely.

These first questions and ideas helped me to gather my thoughts and confirmed that I was reflecting on my understanding from my own lived experience and linking them to my discussions with the students who had left my school early when I was the head of campus. I later refined my mind map, as in Figure 4 (p. 85).

This was obviously leading me into qualitative inquiry. I found in Judith Brown's work (1996) an understanding of the difference between qualitative and quantitative research that confirmed my direction. In qualitative research, says Brown, self-awareness and self-discovery are essential to learning about the approach to inquiry that researchers take. (Brown, 1996) In, *Qualitative Research Methods: A Data Collector's Field Guide* Natasha Mack, Cynthia Woodsong, Kathleen MacQueen, Greg Guest and Emily Namey (2005) provided authenticity to my method of research and reinforced the steps I was taking. I was not inclined to force early school leavers to choose from fixed responses in multiple choice questions, as some quantitative methods do. One advantage of qualitative method in exploratory research, says Mack et al, "is that use of open-ended questions and probing gives participants the opportunity to respond in their own words" (p. 4).

A use of open-ended questions has a tendency to evoke responses that are meaningful, unanticipated, culturally salient and rich with an explanatory nature. Another advantage of qualitative methods is that asking why or how gives flexibility to probe initial participant responses. "The researcher", insists Mack et al., "must listen carefully to what participants say, engage with them according to their individual personalities and

styles, and use ‘probes’ to encourage them to elaborate on their answers” (2005, p. 4). I had become comfortable and confident that I could hone my skills as a researcher with insistence on listening, self-awareness, flexibility and respect for individual differences that practice in qualitative research requires. These skills were becoming my methodology.

Here I turn again to the constitution of the surveys I undertook. Obviously this risks some repetition of information that was necessary for me to use to explain the beginning of my conceptual framework. Repetition enables a reconnecting across the conceptual contexts I developed and I believe it is thus justifiable. There were three distinct groups to survey. The first group was over 1500 year 9 to 12 students who were still in school at the time of the initial ELSS. I was able to re-survey 165 of the initial year ten students of this group two years after the first ELSS and before they had completed year twelve, then a further 68 of the initial year 9 students a year later.

In the research of others, I have mentioned above, I identified various areas to guide the analysis of data. These areas included family, school, teachers and society. Therefore, when it came time to formulate my questions, I wanted to look at similar areas but to try to present questions which might give me a closer insight into the students’ life worlds and how they felt about leaving school early. I also wanted to see whether they had employment pressures and goals for their future.

From the rhetorical questions of my first mind-mapping, I was able to develop my ELSS questions. I did this by thinking of the areas and interests young people would be willing to talk about and would be willing to answer questions about with the least amount of effort and writing. I also spoke with my year 12 students at the time and asked them what they believed were the causes of their peers leaving school early. The next step involved organising a survey. I trialled a draft survey with fifty year 12 students

from outside the catchment area of my study to see if I had worded the questions correctly, had included enough questions to give me data to work with, and if the opportunity for comment and expansion by students was suitable. I note here the reason for trialling the survey outside the catchment area. I did not wish the young people in the catchment area to have had previous access to the survey. I wanted it to be fresh for all of the participants in my catchment area. After the trial, I then fine-tuned the ELSS by altering some wording and placement of questions. In order to maintain a self-imposed check on the relevance to my original research and ELSS material over the five years of my research, I presented material to small professional learning discussion circles at my school and seminars and conferences at various stages of the research. The comments on this material by my peers assisted me in using well-founded reasoning in my analysis without becoming too emotionally tied to what was being said. I also set up a system of personal approaches to students at each school in my research area. These personal approaches led to more active and willing participation by young people in my conversations with them.

My research had at first involved the initial survey and it was surprisingly followed through by student inquiry which led to conceptualising a quantitative method which brought me into closer contact with the students. This survey created further interest amongst the students who had participated in ELSS one and their counsellors. I was approached by the schools and told the students had asked if they could do more sharing on this survey. From this reaching out by the students I was able to run the survey again with a follow up group of 165 students from the original 1500 two years later (ELSS Two), in 2010, and then finally 68 members of the same follow up group in the fourth year (ELSS Three), 2011. I was fortunate to be able to follow one small group of year 9 students from the initial ELSS through to their final year when they were in

year 12. The reason behind this was to establish the veracity of my ELSS questions over time and to see if there was any raised awareness about early school leavers amongst the group.

It was time now to approach school principals for permission to enter their schools with my survey. I first wrote to each of the principals and explained what I hoped to achieve and how I would appreciate an opportunity to discuss my research with them. Then I met with each of them and presented them with the ELSS and explained how it would be administered if they were in agreement. The ELSS was not compulsory and anonymous. All school principals whom I approached granted me permission on behalf of their school community, including parents. They could see that no individual students could be identified and that no school could be distinguished in the final tabulation of the data. The information I would gather from the survey was to provide a purely statistical foundation of baseline information for further inquiry. In the feedback principals desired, I named the schools A, B, C, and so on. The feedback data was to relate to year group lists of statistics, reasons for poor attendance, hating school/subjects or wishing to leave and statements about their goals, part-time work and what students thought about good and bad teachers.

Influences that determine my wording of the survey questions

Ethics

There would be no one who could argue against the fact that one of the fundamental experiences that young people at school have to manage is the relationship they must compulsorily have with their teachers. Here I must ensure myself, and my reader, that I act and write with impunity. That is, without impugning, without assailing with words, without calling into question the integrity of teachers, schools and the students

themselves. To assure readers and myself, I face the challenge of enacting an ethos of correctness and respect for participants in my survey and for those for whom my thesis might be helpful to their professions. To gain some insight into relationships early school leavers had with teachers, I did have to risk including questions in the ELSS about teacher/student relations, like and dislike of subjects and courses, and how teachers responded to or assisted those in need of help in order to remain at school. My personal understanding after thirty-five years of teaching has had an influence on the survey questions and my interview questions, a bias which will be discussed later. My belief that schools should provide opportunities for young people by empowering them with the skills to learn, life skills and behaviour self-management skills they will need, whilst offering an opportunity for them to review their personal ethical code or set of values, was inevitably to influence the words and manner of my questions. Schools not only teach subject matter or develop instrumental skills, they are necessarily involved in shaping character and providing students with the skills to shape lives.

I consider that ethical aspirations are at the core of schools' business, particularly as it relates to devotion to the pastoral care of young people. Ethical concern is embedded in the everyday activities of schools and should be made explicit, accepted by the staff and parents and openly acknowledged by public communication. Teachers should be sensitive to the ethical implications of their own policies and practices, as well as those of the school and the education system, for example, classroom discipline practices. The building of strong, positive relationships between the student, teacher and parents is essential.

Full-time Students — Part-time work

I understand that many young people leave school without the necessary skills, behavioural self-management strategies and work ethic to succeed in the world of employment. Most teachers would argue that all children should receive a high quality education that provides them with knowledge, understandings and skills, not just those who remain until the end of year 12 or who have opportunities others miss because of their suburban location and socio-economic circumstances.

Do we truly understand what a student has gone through either the evening before, or in the morning, in order to be in school or their classes on a particular day? When faced with some of the problems that students of today have, there is little wonder why they may be leaving school early. Some of my students, and students who participated in the ELSS, worked until one in the morning at their part-time jobs on week nights. Others had to get their siblings to school and prepare breakfast or a lunch as their parent was not around or not able to do this. As mentioned later in the small discussion groups problems such as these, on top of other personal problems, would potentially add to the reasons a student had for not attending school.

Snowballing effect of daily life trials

I believe the cartoon of Bill Waterson's *Calvin and Hobbs* is an example of the daily life of our students and for this reason I have included it below. My idea is not to get a smile from my reader, so much as to ask how much of this might be true, or even more importantly, how much worse might it be for some of our students. The cartoon and my own questions with the current students and former students I met with as part of my research discussions suggest questions such as, why are they tired? How many students are confronted with negative teacher responses? What part does harassment and bullying

play? Is there a reason for all students to do homework? Are students missing 'fun' time? How many are affected by what occurs in the home or away from school?

It might be worth considering that following a phenomenological approach to inquiry, 'reading' a cartoon and interpreting it, would lead to discovering some plausible insights into lived experience. From there, attitudes to interpreting might become philosophical reflection, as Sokolowski suggests. Sokolowski (2000) distinguishes between taking a philosophical perspective and the "perspective we have when we simply propositionalize and test a statement for the truth of correctness" (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 194).

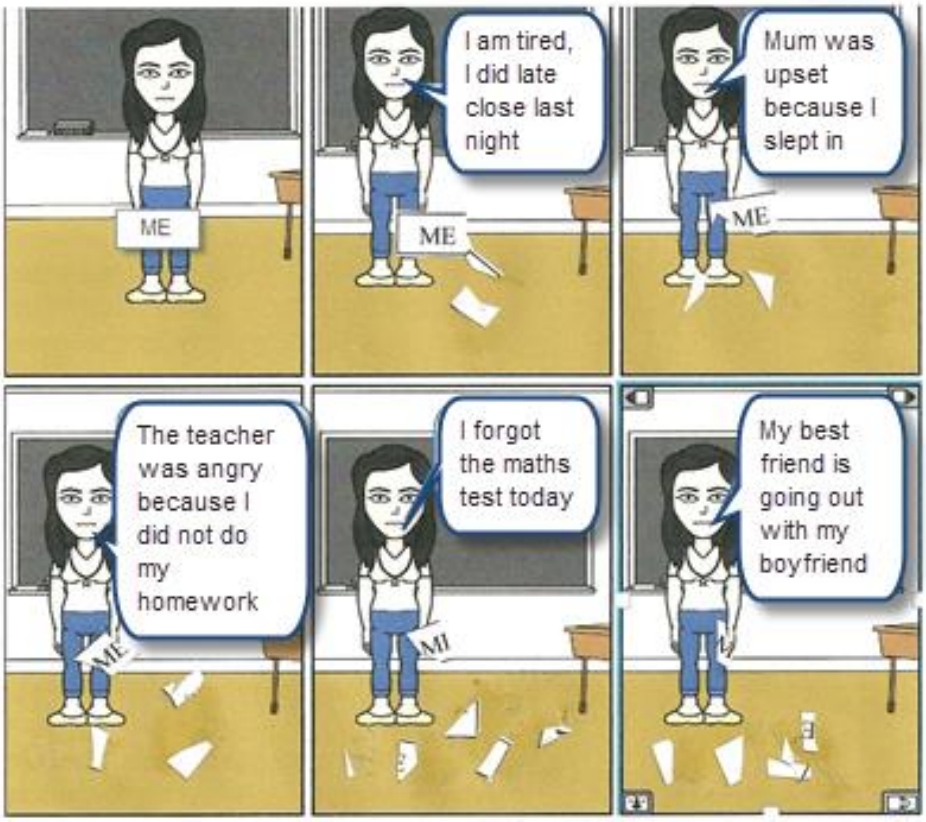
I wish to encourage my reader to adopt a philosophical rather than propositional perspective as you read the *Calvin and Hobbs* comic strip. Sokolowski (2000) gives some insight about what reading a cartoon philosophically means. The philosopher, he says,

> … could not be depicted inside the comic strip. The philosopher is something like the person who is reading the comic strip, not like one of the personalities within it. He stands outside" the frame of the natural attitude, outside the comic strip cartoons. The philosopher … contemplates the goings-on in the comic strip … (p. 195)

(Watterson, 1989, p. 78)

In the philosophical attitude, reflective questioning and interpreting offers many possibilities for understanding the story of *ME*.

ME



While at a school camp, I asked the students to use colour, diagrams, drawings and any other media to tell us all who they truly were. When it came to present their work, I noticed Simone, normally a very good student, who had only written the word "ME" on a blank piece of paper. I took her aside and asked if there was anything wrong or did she have a problem with the concept. Simone replied "this is ME but I need to explain it to the class." After a few giggles and snickers Simone began to tell her story. *"Because we need to money I have to work most nights, sometimes I do not close up until 2 am. By the time I get home I know I will only get 4 hours' sleep."* At this point she tore a section off the sheet. "*If I sleep in, mum gets angry and I have to go without breakfast because I get my little brother's lunch ready each day."* Simone then tore off another section. Simone then progressed through her 'normal' day, explaining why she

did not have time for friends as she used her free time and lunchtime to do her homework or prepare for tests. When she had finished her presentation there was only a little piece of paper left in her hand. Everyone in that room now knew more about Simone than they thought possible.

The person who is "me," Simone, relates her lived experience. Simone and her reader cannot perceive the concept of "me" similarly. As Sokolowski suggests, Simone might theorise her lived experience, so might her reader, but only her reader can see her experience from the outside as a philosopher. In the phenomenological approach of my inquiry, I see my participants from the outside, and myself only reflecting from the inside. In these ways I orient myself to early school leavers.

These three areas of influence — ethics, full-time student — part-time work, and the snowballing effect of daily life on self-esteem and capacity to achieve at school — enable me to reach out for more detail in response to the family, society, school, curriculum and employment sections of the surveys.

Gaining trust — gaining research

My research included the three surveys and conversations with three discussion groups. Quite by coincidence a matter of serendipity occurred. This was to give me an opportunity I had least expected—to involve myself in deeper conversation with young people than I had believed I could achieve. I was in the local bus mall checking on problems some of my students were having at the time. A young man approached me and we began chatting. He explained that he was a youth worker with the local council and that he knew some of my students. After some time, we began a conversation about young people from the suburb who left school early. He then told me he had contact with a number of different groups, one of which consisted of young people who had left

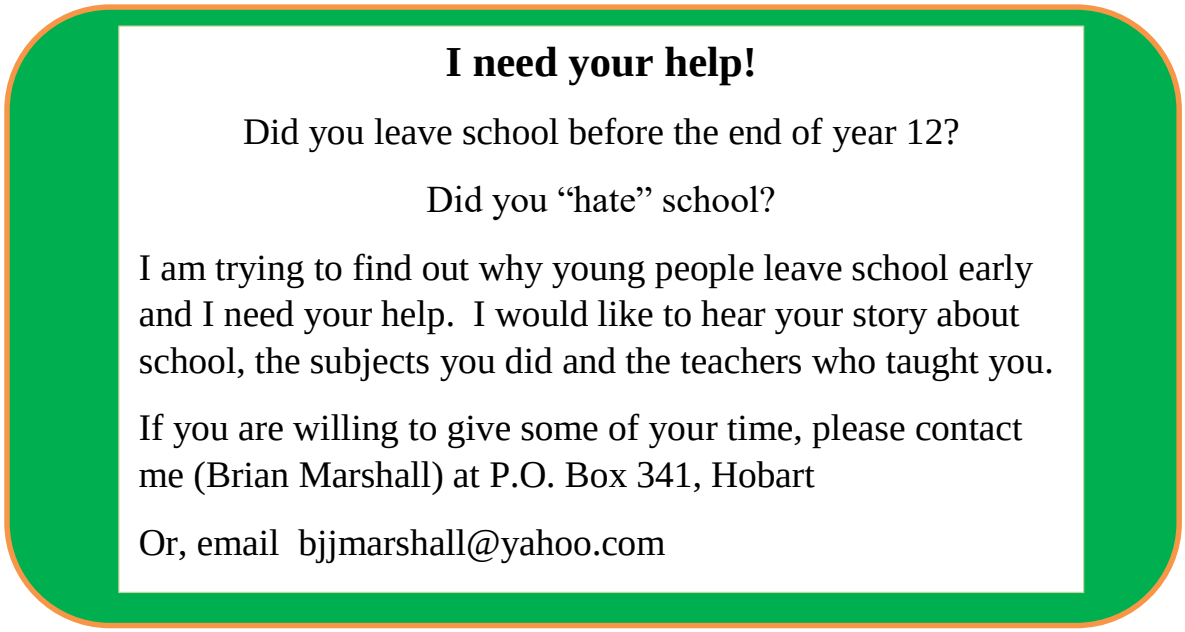
home and school. He said they met each Friday at 10.30 am and asked if I would like to come and meet with them. He suggested that I wear plain clothes but he would explain to the group why I was there. On that first Friday, I turned up not knowing what to expect. In front of me was a group of twenty-five young people who were attending 'catch up' literacy and numeracy courses at a local government youth centre and who told me they called themselves "street kids" because they spent most of their time living rough and on the street. As the morning progressed, I assisted them in peeling vegetables for a large pot of soup they were making for their lunch. During lunchtime, I sat with them and told them my own lived experience and why I would appreciate listening to their lived experience.

Thanks to the flexibility of my administration time at the college I was working with at the time, I was able to meet with this group every Friday for almost one full year. I was able to gain their trust and they provided me with many insights into the lives they led at school, home and the community up until that present time. Members of this group had left school early and had moved out of home. In Chapter five, I present the diverse reasons they gave me for leaving home. The second group was a group of current year 12 students who were thinking of leaving school or who had family or friends who had left school over the past three years. This group became a category, "potential early school leavers" to include in my research because of their first-hand knowledge of lived experiences of early school leavers and their leaning towards becoming an early school leaver. Again, I was fortuitous in meeting these students. Through the survey work at the two local senior colleges, I was able to meet staff who were also interested in my research topic. They were able to introduce me to students who fell into this category. We met as a group in the local library meeting room and then I met with them on an individual basis at the same location. The final group was a small group of 16 to 22 year

olds who responded to advertisements placed around the local suburban area — these became a third category for dialogues, “unemployed early school leavers”. I sent them a follow-up letter explaining the research.

After speaking with the group, I made arrangement to meet each member separately so I could hear their lived experience. To maintain consistency across each interview I created a list of points for use during the interviews and set them out on a single page. The interviewee and I held a copy of my questions and these questions became a guide for the conversations I had with each person. We read my questions prior to the interviews for clarity about what I would be asking and why.

Figure 2 A copy of the poster placed around the local suburban area.



I wanted to encourage the young people just to speak with me in their own language, and without saying so to them, even if that included invective or vituperative words or phrases. I believed that to censure their language might silence them. After establishing the questions for guiding the interviews, listed in Figure 2 below, I

established a meeting location and times to encourage them to share their lived experience of each person who belonged to one of the three categories. Their insightful dialogue assisted me greatly. While I endeavoured to include in Chapter five as much of the dialogue as I could some of the stories and information were repetitive and therefore not included. I was extremely grateful for the way each young person trusted me and gave fully and truthfully of their experiences.

These interviews were entirely informal and not controlled by the set of detailed questions. Rather, I used the pre-defined list of issues to entice their stories about topics such as youth unemployment, social problems, suburban stigma and the use of skills they already had. The interview method used by me amounted to an informal conversation about why they did, or did not, want to complete their schooling and their personal stories. I was not concerned with discovering what they thought about the issue of early school leavers. The aim was to find out how these young people thought about school and how they reacted to issues relating to their time at school.

I encouraged the interviewees to talk freely about their personal reasons for leaving and to reveal as much as they could about what they felt or thought about the issues of leaving school before the end of year 12. I asked their permission to take notes or record on tape all remarks that I thought might be relevant to my research. This type of record making was to help me extend the conversations with them in later interviews.

Figure 3 Stimulus questions to build rapport and stimulate conversation between interviewee and researcher

Before we begin let me reaffirm our early conversation by stating that I will not use your real name and details in the final document. Anything disclosed between us in these discussions will remain private and confidential. You may decide not to allow me to use it in my research. I will respect your decision and not include it.

What is your first name? How old are you? How old where you when you left school?

What year level were you in at the time?

Why did you leave?

Had you considered staying on at the same school or a different school?

If you were made to leave what were the circumstances?

Did your parents have any say in the decision to leave school?

Tell me about your time at school and anything that had an impact on your school life?

Could you tell me about your family structure and lifestyle?

What year levels did your parents complete when they went to school?

Do your parents work? If so what do they do?

Was there anyone at school who tried to help you? Was there a time at school you enjoyed?

Do you have any brothers and/or sisters? Did they leave school early or are they still in school?

What do you do with yourself now that you have left school?

Where do you live? If you do not live at home do you see your family?

Did you work part-time while you were at school? If yes how many hours per week (on average)?

What did you like about the best teachers? What did you not like about the teachers?

If you had the opportunity to speak with current students, what advice would you give them?

If you had the opportunity, would you return and complete your schooling?

If it were under a different format, for example more casual, would you consider returning to education

By taking their remarks, and getting the young people to expand on some of the points they had raised, I was able to gain a better insight into each of the individuals involved until I was satisfied that there was no more to be gained by further discussion. I was also aware that there might be some bias in the responses from these young people. Some may have tended to exaggerate in order to make their problems more important or may have had a faulty memory of some incidents. To try to overcome these biases I interviewed each person at least three times over a time period of six months. In further interviews, I would use the same questions in different ways so that I could check the responses given on each occasion.

In other states of Australia, there are higher densities of indigenous or ethnic cultures than in Tasmania. In the schools of my suburb, there are relatively small numbers of people of ethnic or indigenous origin. I did not direct my questions to any specific cultural influence on these students. At all times, I was conscious not to be judgemental or opinionative, respecting the cultural traditions of the participants.

All the school principals I approached gave me permission to speak to possible participants. Some staff helped as well talking with their students and distributing the ELSS survey. We told the students they could opt out even after completion of the ELSS. The ELSS form had a note to this affect at the top of it (Appendix 2). The students received the ELSS as a small A5 booklet that was well laid out and colour coded per year group.

Orientating my inquiry to the life worlds of young people

To make the survey not too large to be overwhelming, easy to respond to and administered in a short period of time, I designed a folded A5 page booklet with four pages (see Appendix 2). The first page of the ELSS would provide an indication of age,

gender, school and how the students considered they were coping with school. It would also be an opportunity to ask about their intentions and the subjects they enjoyed. The second page would be used to establish what students felt were the positive and negative characteristics of their teachers. I also wished to know which school years they enjoyed the most, if they missed a lot of school through being absent, whom they turned to for advice and if they thought education was worthwhile. The third page asked them what they saw as the reasons they, or their peers, would have for leaving school before the end of year 12. I had also noticed in the documents and literature that I had been reading and my discussions with students at the senior campus that a number of them were working long hours part-time and still trying to be a full-time student. Therefore, I included a section on hours worked and on what they might use the money they earn. The final page of the ELSS form would obtain an indication of their future goals and pathways. I also wished to discover if they had intentions of leaving school before the completion of year 12 and, if so, what might be their reasons.

I was deliberately designing the questions of the study to draw information about the world of lived experience of the early school leavers whose opinions and narratives I was seeking to understand. I wanted to know something not only about their immediate experience, but also about the world they already knew. Their histories would help deepen my understanding of the compounding circumstances that I suspected underline their decisions.

Whilst the survey was ‘out’, I was receiving a variety of responses from my advertisements, and posters (Figure 1, p.59) as well as responses from people outside the suburban area of my research, my next step was to ‘select’ a group to work with in discussion groups and interviews. I wished to include participants from the entire suburban area and from a range of ages. To avoid bias in statistics and responses, I

wanted to limit any concentration of participants who had been to any one school. I wanted early school leavers from as many of the schools that took part in the first large ELSS. If I had taken former students of one particular high school, there may have been bias in responses if the causes or factors had been the school, the teachers or the curriculum on offer. I deliberately tried to make the volunteer group up from former students of a number of the schools and both state and private schools.

To each selected response, I sent a letter, with permission slip and reply paid contact, explaining my research and my reasons for wanting to interview the respondents and to assure him or her of privacy in participation.

In the data I would receive from the surveys, discussions and personal interviews I was looking for any links between various findings from the literature, the ELSS responses and the personal interviews. I would compare the results I obtained and similar findings elsewhere (Lamb, 1996; Rudd, Reed, & Smith, 2008). I gathered all of my results from the ELSS and placed them on a spreadsheet (See Appendix 3). I transcribed the recorded notes from my discussions with early leavers. Later I analysed the transcripts for the purpose of interpreting my inquiry and findings in Chapters Five to Eight of my thesis.

The ELSS, as mentioned previously, was divided into year groups not age groups. Given that students in these year groups may have started their schooling at different ages or that some of the students had been held back a year, it was possible for one year group to have a range of students over a three year gap. For example, a year 10 class may have students whose ages were ranged from 15 to 17, or perhaps 14 to 16. The upper and lower extremities were only small in number as the majority of year 10 students fell within the 15 and 16 age group.

Figure 4 Why some students disengage from school

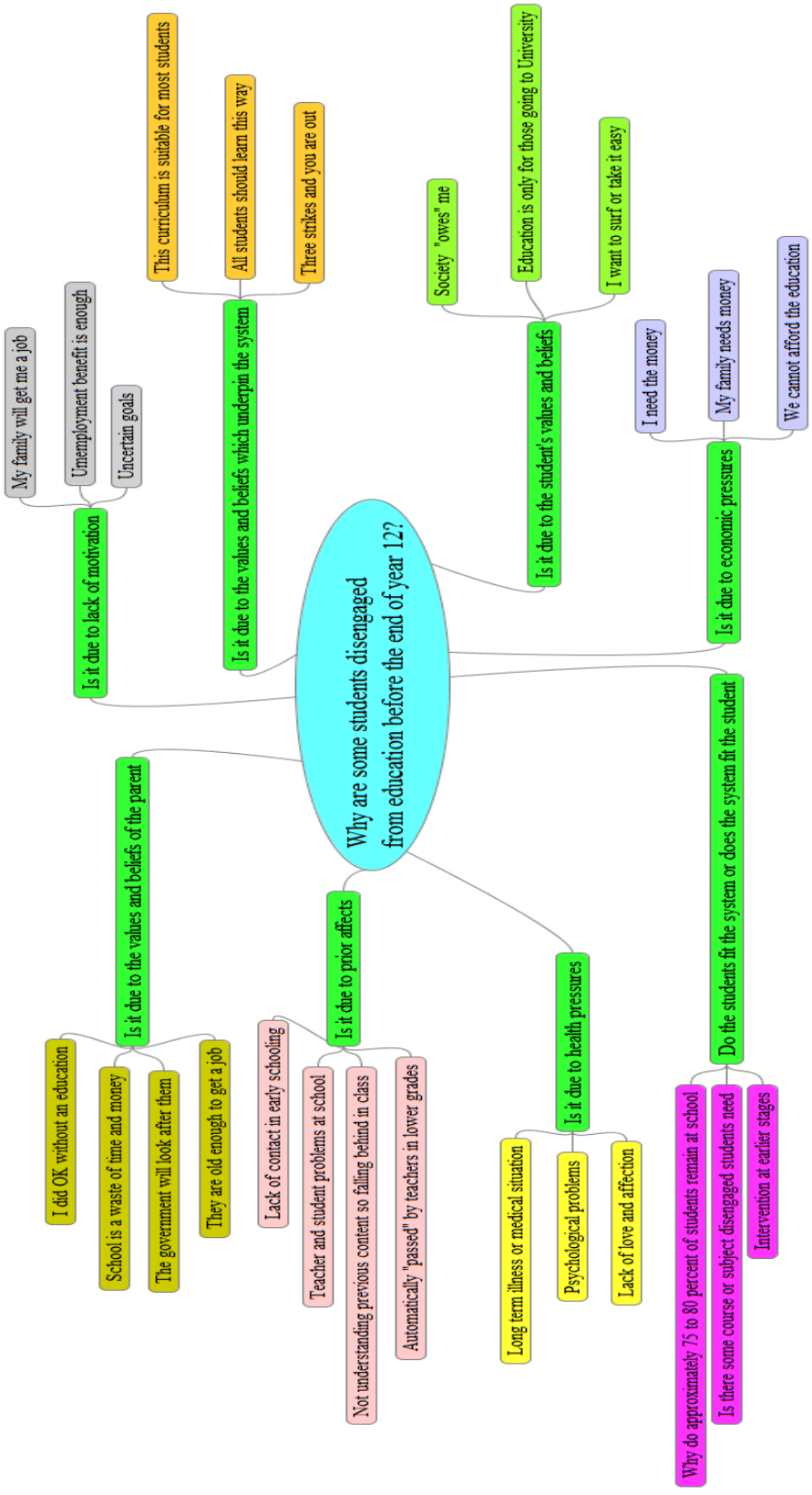
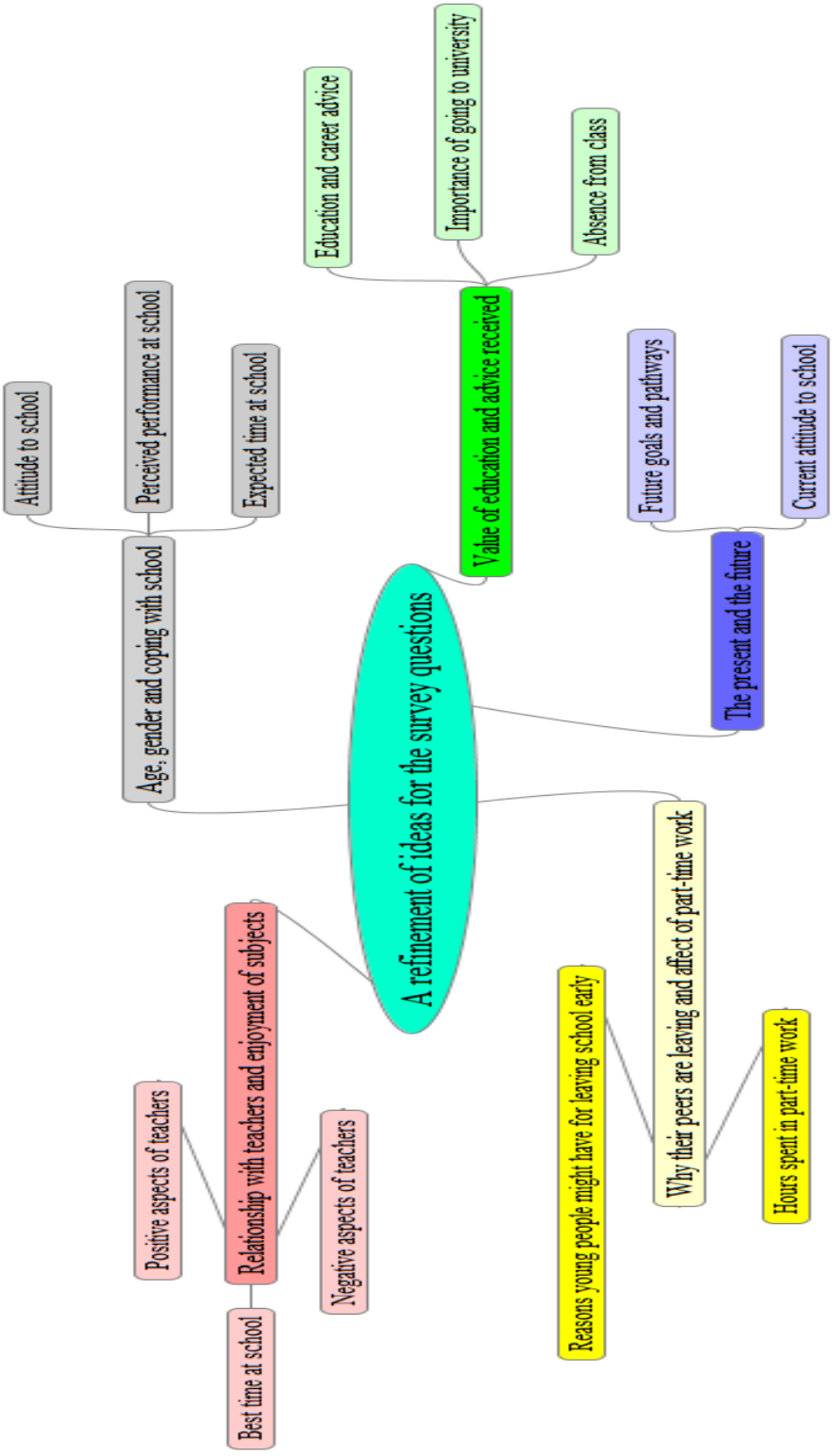


Figure 5 A refinement of ideas for survey questions



Here it is important to mention again what came about as interest was stirred by students and teachers participating in the conduct of the original survey. The follow-up ELSS with the 165 students who had been surveyed two years prior came about because a principal of a senior college, in discussing my research with me, said some of his students had mentioned they had completed the ELSS while in year 9 or 10. He said the students had indicated the benefit of having some questions placed in front of them as the questions enabled them to think about where they were actually heading and how much they had planned the years ahead. He asked if I would be willing to run the same survey now with the year 11 and 12 students who had participated in the earlier research. This was a good sign. Of course, I was very willing for this to happen. Because of the designed anonymity of the ELSS, and the fact that the year 11 and 12 students came from a variety of high schools within the same suburban location, it was impossible to compare individual responses from the first ELSS with the second one.

Manual data gathering

Manual data gathering involved me in examining each form. Sometimes I discarded a form that displayed offensive language, no data or only ticks related to age and gender. In compiling the data, I included those ELSS forms which I considered more than 50 per cent completed with those that had every section completed. This explains why some figures in the totals do not always match up with the total forms. Another reason for inconsistent totals is because some students gave multiple answers to some questions and these were included. I tallied the data from each school and recorded this onto a

spreadsheet. I used the spreadsheet data to generate the various tables and graphs for presentation in my inquiry.

I hoped the collection of this data and the interpretation of the statistics gathered from the ELSS would provide an insight into some of the factors affecting the choices of students to leave school prior to the end of year 12. While student choice was limited in some of my questions, I was able to obtain further insight from the 'other' causes listed by students, such as pregnancy and drugs, plus the comments at the end of the ELSS.

Unexpected issues that influenced my evolving inquiry

Before I embarked on analysis, one repeated comment became immediately intriguing for me, a small number of students commented that the ELSS helped them clarify where they might be heading, what a good sign! Another repeated comment was the influence that boyfriends or girlfriends had upon each other's decisions.

Yet another surprise was the way in which students could discern between a good teacher and a poor teacher. While some students said a good teacher was one who allowed them to 'muck about' or not do any work, most were able to express a list of skills and attributes they considered a good teacher should have.

I foreshadow these issues as an interesting point. Later I discuss these influential piques to my curiosity more fully in my analyses in chapters 5 to 8. These early insights, coming at a time when I was simultaneously tallying data and conducting discussion groups, helped me gain more in-depth responses in the discussions and interviews which followed.

It was not so much that this mattered. What mattered more to me, and obviously to the school principals, that already at this stage of my inquiry, my intention to make a difference to the minds and hearts of students and the practice of teachers in the final school years was coming to fruition. I was then invited back to speak with approximately 68 of the same students the next year. At this time, I asked them to re-examine the ELSS and see if they could remember some of their answers from two years before. I recorded the responses in a third spreadsheet, ELSS Three (Appendix 4). What I did find was consistency in their responses as nothing much had altered in the trend of data. Once their mind was made up to leave it was made up! This recalls my discussion of GHK consulting, Nevala and Hawley in chapter two and forewarns me to suggest that there was more to the problem of early school leavers than the nature of the curriculum. I was becoming more convinced that the answer might be in their relating to others — school, school teachers, family, peers and society.

Chapter four

Understanding dialogue and story that reveals real lived experience

Gavin told me that he wanted to join the police force, but his academic record was not good enough. One of his teachers would stay behind after school with Gavin coaching him in Mathematics and English. He even gave Gavin some mock tests to make certain he was ready. Gavin sat the entrance exam and passed; he has been in the Police force for three years now and always remembers the help the teacher gave him.

Tien said she was very lucky, as her family had expected her to do well because her siblings had achieved high academic awards. This meant she already had an expectation placed upon her, and her older brothers pushed her to do well. Tien said she felt sorry for her friends who did not have these expectations nor had family assistance, most of them had given up trying and left school during their year 12 time.

Scott wanted to stay at school, but his parents could not afford to help him buy books and pay subject levies. One of the teachers heard about this and arranged for her husband to give Scott a part-time job after school and during the holidays. Scott was able to use the money he earned to finish year 12 and eventually to go to university.

These three stories were told to me by students who did not wish to become early school leavers—one was told his academic record was not good enough to continue, another was

pressed too far by family expectations and inadequate support, and the third was constrained by poverty.

Following my reading of Charles Guignon (2008), David McDonald, Gabriele Bammer, and Peter Deane (2005), I held a good understanding of the type of dialogue method I believed would work with my discussion groups and the role of authenticity. The issue of recognising the relevant dialogue method to be used in my discussions with the three groups meant that I had to reflect upon my values, the values of the participants, what we said and what we thought we said, the issues and the importance of the issues to each of the participants and myself, and any preconceived judgements which may interfere. I wanted the dialogue to be flexible and open. I believed this would allow members of each of the discussion groups to take me down their life pathway without feeling a need or requirement to stick to a set format. I wanted to hear their story, as they saw it and how it affected their lives.

The members of each of the three discussion groups (approximately 80 people) did not, at first, know me nor did I know them. This in itself was good but also difficult. By not knowing any member of the groups, I hoped they would be more open and truthful in their personal revelations. However, I was a stranger to them and with very little time to gain their trust and confidence I wanted them to relate personal experiences.

My method of assisting the dialogue in the groups was to take note of four authors who assisted in clarifying my understanding and gave me an insight into an honest approach to dialogue, not one biased by my own preconceived ideas and experiences. Four authors in particular, Gadamer for understanding *understanding*, Bohm on dialogue, Freire on ethical responsibility related to storytelling, and Dewey on

friendship and relationships, were very useful in the establishment of my ELSS and the dialogue method to be used with individuals and the groups. As well, van Manen and Jane Gallop, philosophers, educators and counsellors, assisted me in seeing the value of anecdotal theory toward developing understanding of stories told and shared of lived experience through dialogue and conversation

Gadamer and understanding

While searching for philosophy and links to education and research I learned of Martin Heidegger (1927), but more importantly of his protégé Gadamer. It was Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (1975) and his goal to uncover the nature of human understanding which I believe was most appropriate to my ELSS questions and how I was going to conduct my research. I realised that while my research would contain surveys and statistics there was also a need for dialogue in order to obtain a mutual understanding between my subjects and myself. Statistics could be arranged to present a bias, either intentionally or unintentionally. However, the interview and dialogue would provide me with an understanding of the background and values of current students who took part in the survey and those who were once students and agreed to be members of the discussion groups. In reality, I had to question my understanding of the culture of the young people who would take part in my research, to understand the subject matter at the centre of my research. I questioned myself and any bias I may bring to the research given my own background and the fact that I had grown up in a neighbourhood similar to the one on which my research was focused. It was also important to organise a number of interviews with young people from this suburban area and not just rely on the surveys.

The personal interviews would allow me to look at bias that these young people may hold about education or toward their school experience. In the interviews, I hoped that those who would take part in the three discussion groups would be grateful for the opportunity to talk with someone about their experiences.

According to Gadamer, truth may be a linguistic concept, scientific concept, or aesthetic concept (Gadamer, 1975, p. 118). He further explains that in order to understand the written or spoken language we need to consider our own preconceptions and which of these may hinder or help our understanding (or misunderstanding) (p. 263). Gadamer's dialogical approach and the significance of the interview once again re-enforced my need to include interviews in my research. He invites us into conversation in order to understand. This approach was suited to my own personality and connectivity with current and former students, it becomes an important part of my research.

Gadamer writes about truth, he sees truth as not something which is determined by a particular method of inquiry, but as something which transcends the limits of reasoning based on only the method of research. The truth of spoken or written language may be revealed when we discover the conditions under which it was developed. We need to know and understand the 'culture' of the people in order for an understanding of its meaning. Gadamer uses examples, such as the aesthetics of art and language to question truth and understanding. He explains that in order to understand spoken or written language, we must have some anticipation of its meaning. However, if we have preconceived ideas of the meaning behind the language we may actually be misled in our interpretation of the meaning. I found this section of Gadamer's work important in

analysing any preconceptions I may have had and any the early leavers may have had. A person who understands a text, says Gadamer,

> … has not only projected himself understandingly toward a meaning— in the effort of understanding—but the accomplished understanding constitutes a state of new intellectual freedom. It implies the general possibility of interpreting, of seeing connections, of drawing conclusions, which constitutes being well versed in textual interpretation. Even understanding an expression means, ultimately, not only immediately grasping what lies in the expression, but disclosing what is enclosed in it, so that one now knows this hidden part also. (p. 251)

What Gadamer has said, was important to my recognition of the language and personal expressions used by those early leavers who considered themselves to be street kids. My own perception of street kids meant that they were living it rough, for example, I knew they were actually living in old buildings or in parks and alleyways. I was to find out later during my interviews that most street kids admitted their self-designated term also applied if they were living in someone else's house for a night or period of time.

Gadamer provided further insight for me as I worked with the young people from my research area. I was between 40 and 45 years older than the people I was working with. My terminology and language was different to that used by the young people involved in my research. Gadamer explains that the meaning of language is constantly being interpreted and to place its meaning on the interpretation at a particular point in time may deprive language of its true meaning. The extent of our understanding may change over time and the extent to which we understand is situated within the hermeneutical tradition of the time (Gadamer, 1975). While my lived experience as a youth was similar to that of the young people I was to speak with, I had lived in a

different era, a more community involved era and a time of relevant safety. The hermeneutical tradition Gadamer writes about continued to grow from not relying on a particular genre of textual style but on linguistic meaning as it moved away from biblical studies as the basis of interpretation. The understanding of language as used by the young people I interviewed and surveyed was important for a better interpretation of what they were actually saying.

As Gadamer says, For the interpreter to let himself be guided by the things themselves is obviously not a matter of a single, "conscientious" decision, but is "the first, last, and constant task" (p. 269). Gadamer called it "fore-projection or fore-knowing", I looked at this as my own personal prejudice. To use Gadamer's ideas, I wanted to question my own prejudice in the research I was about to undertake, what Gadamer says was Heidegger's fore-structure or fore-meaning (Gadamer, 1975, p. 270). Having lived the experience of being an early school leaver myself, coming from a low socio-economic background and suffering from being constantly put down by language and action—consequently having become a teacher of students—I became concerned about my own fore-knowing.

> A person who is trying to understand is exposed to distraction from fore-meanings that are not borne out by the things themselves. Working out appropriate projections, anticipatory in nature, to be confirmed "by the things" themselves, is the constant task of understanding. (p. 270)

Having accepted the idea that language and historical understandings of what I was trying to research may contain some prejudice, I had to understand and accept that this was acceptable because I was aware of the prejudice. That is, it would require

recognizing and bringing any prejudice out into the open so it can be seen in the context of understanding, so a "text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth" (p. 272).

I began to look further at what approach I would take with various discussion groups and how I could word my research survey differently. I also needed to understand if my group work and survey would be a conversation with the young people involved or if I was speaking at them as some adults and teachers may do. I tended to look on dialogue as a means to explore what was behind certain problems in society, such as why some students leave school earlier than others. It was not to be a question and answer model, I wanted input from the participants without outside influence. It was this need to understand the difference between conversations, dialogue and speaking with students which led me to Bohm's book *On Dialogue* (2004).

Bohm and dialogue

In Bohm's explanation of communication and dialogue (2004) there are two sections in his first that assisted me in my research, "… students tend to feel their teachers are overwhelming them with a flood of information which they suspect is irrelevant to actual life" (Bohm, 2004, p. 1)

Again, Bohm uses dialogue to indicate a process whereby two parties can move to having something in common, a reaching of truth that both parties can agree to. He says "Thus, in a dialogue, each person does not attempt to *make common* certain ideas…. Rather, it may be said that the two people are making something *in common*, that is, creating something new together" (p. 3).

I saw the need to ensure that my survey and discussions would allow for a free flowing of input and that I should not place restrictions on any feedback or statement. My work with the group of young people who referred to themselves as street kids would only operate smoothly if there was a degree of trust and give and take. I had to allow, if not encourage, the sense that what they might say could possibly benefit other young people in the future and that I was not trying to denigrate their circumstances or the culture that may have led them to their current situation. According to Bohm, "If one is alert and attentive, he can see, for example that whenever certain questions arise, there are fleeting sensations of fear, which push him away from consideration of these questions" (p. 5).

If my research was to assist students, and, in particular, early school leavers, then I needed to move beyond a simple conversation of fact finding and base it on some firm data which I could obtain from the ELSS material. I needed to develop skills that would allow me to hold a dialogue with the 'at-risk' students.

> When we come together to talk or otherwise act in common, can each one of us be aware of the subtle fear and pleasure sensations that "block" our ability to listen freely? Without this awareness, the injunction to listen to the whole of what is said will have little meaning. (Bohm, 2004, p. 5)

As I met with the early school leavers and discussed their situations, there was one key point that kept arising. I found that students in the suburb where my research was conducted had an almost measureable belief of "them versus us" concerning how teachers understood them or related to them. It could be said that teachers, and the education system in general, needs to take a closer look at the experiences early school

leavers are undergoing and the diverse nature of their domestic culture as compared to other people involved in education. I had become aware that to try to impose middle-class values, goals and expectations on students, who might be more worried about immediate survival, restricts dialogue, which was to become an important activity in my research.

> In any culture there are vast numbers of opinions which help make up that culture. And there are also subcultures that are somewhat different from one another according to, for example, ethnic groups, or to economic situations, or to race, religion, or thousands of other things. (Bohm, 2004, p. 12)

I was becoming more interested in the notion that a trusty teacher-student dialogue, could help students to stay at school. Dialogue is a multifaceted process as seen by Bohm, not merely a conversation, "…a dialogue is something more of a common participation, in which we are not playing a game against each other, but with each other" (p. 7).

I was coming to ask whether teachers and education systems may need to take a much closer look at the experiences of early school leavers, the values the early school leavers hold from the culture they are growing up in, the emotional turmoil or under-development they are experiencing and the thought analysis method they are using. A dialogic communicator will engage in conversation to find an outcome that maintains values and ethics, what Bohm refers to as "sort of an empty place" (p.49). A conversation directed from one person's view point will propel their own objectives and may have no or little concern for the other participant or the ethical ramifications of the communicative actions. If teachers live in a suburb with a higher socio-economic status

than their students and earn a much higher income than the parents of the students, there is a concern that the values and expectations will be used to measure the values and ethics of the students from the lower socio-economic suburb.

When a teacher writes in a student's report that they need to do more study at home, have they taken into account that the student could be working 15 to 25 hours per week in order to make money? Or that students have many other responsibilities to the family or to the youth culture in which they live? Outside pressure to belong to a group in their neighbourhood can lead students to disregard the future and what it may hold and only concentrate on the here and now.

Paulo and Ana Freire's work, Pedagogy of hope, (2004) writes to this point. How well do we know our students? Although he is speaking with an indigenous group of farmers, the underlying message remains. One of Freire's agricultural discussion circle members confronted him and told him that he knew the type of house he lived in.

> He fixed me with a mild, but penetrating gaze, and asked: "Dr. Paulo, sir – do you know where people live? Have you ever been in any of our houses, sir?" And he began to describe their pitiful houses. He told me of the lack of facilities, of the extremely minimal space in which all their bodies were jammed. He spoke of the lack of resources for the most basic necessities. (Freire & Freire, 2004, p. 17)

Not everyone could communicate this as clearly—due to culture, language or fear of the situation in which they find themselves.

We all hold different values and beliefs and may try to defend these even if we rely on emotional argument rather than rational argument. Dialogue goes into all the

pressures that are behind assumptions, it goes into the thinking behind assumptions. Therefore, when trying to hold a dialogue with the students and families from the suburb in which the research was conducted, my own assumptions had to be analysed to see if I was biased due to the collective perceptions held by many people outside of this suburb. Bohm (2004) writes about the nature of collective thought and the way different assumptions and opinions are affected by collective reaction. While not opposing collective thought in itself he does say that the "representation of thought enters the presentation of perception" (p. 63) and sometimes this may lead to errors. Errors such as accepting what is espoused by others rather than seeking your own evidence. "If someone says, "People of this category are bad," and you accept that then...it goes into implicit, tacit thought" (pp. 65-66).

Bohm explains that when you see a person from a particular culture or suburb it brings to mind preconceived ideas and you automatically see the "badness or goodness" (p. 66) in this person. It may not be true but you think about it as if it were entirely an independent fact. As observers we have mixed thought with 'fact' and can often give it greater value by saying to someone else in a conversation that it is 'pure' fact. It is a social representation that we, as members of a society are accepting as truth, and because other members of our group agree, then it must be true. Part of the reason we may react this way has to do with urban myths within our culture and our class consciousness, or lack of it. In my classroom I often heard young people from other suburbs refer to the young people who come from the research area as "bogans" or "chiggers," two of many derogatory terms with which these young people were unjustifiably labelled.

I remember turning up to ‘try outs’ for the school football team and a teacher questioning why I was there because “your parents can’t afford the equipment.” Because my parents struggled to pay school fees the teacher automatically decided I should not play football. Many years later I turned up to play for an old scholar’s invitational game. When I came off the field at the end the same teacher queried why I had never played for the school as I was now classified, in his mind, as being in a different group.

Sociological maps of large Australian cities show that wealth, children studying at private schools and high densities of tertiary qualified graduates match up, suburb by suburb. According to Graham Hastings (2004) there is a similar correlation between low wealth, children studying at public schools and a low density of tertiary graduates.

Just as some members of society may judge people by where they come from so too can teachers compare students from one suburban area or socio-economic background and label them all the same. Teachers often compare siblings—if he is like that she will be like that. Bohm (2004) writes that normally we do not see that our assumptions are affecting the nature of our observations. But assumptions affect the way we see things, the way we experience them, and, consequently, the things we want to do.

Freire and ethical responsibility

In the early stages of my research I discovered the educational philosophy of Paulo Freire (Freire, 2000, 2001; Freire & Freire, 2004) and to read a number of his works and those associated with his pedagogy. Not only did I read but I had many an opportunity to engage in dialogue with my fellow students while reading Freire together. My interest increased with each book that I read and each commentary I was introduced to in my

reading. Freire's ability to learn from those around him who are classified as peasant farmers almost becomes a significant pedagogy for beginning teachers. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000) he explains the difference between the "banking" concept of education where the teacher deposits knowledge and the student is expected to receive this and memorise it and the "libertarian" education, which begins by reconciling the student-teacher distinction so that both are teachers and students.

> If children reared in an atmosphere of lovelessness and oppression, children whose potency has been frustrated, do not manage during their youth to take the path of authentic rebellion, they will drift into total indifference, alienated from reality by the authorities and the myths the latter have used to "shape" them; or they may engage in forms of destructive behaviour. (p. 136)

I see Bohm's ideas reflected in Freire's. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Freire writes of his South American experiences, especially with the poor farmers and their families. He writes that the only way to gain improvement in the situation of these farmers is through the right kind of education, that is, one which is not directed by an external authority but one based on the actual life experiences of the students. "So often," Freire says, "do they hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing and are incapable of learning anything – that they are sick, lazy, and unproductive – that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness" (p. 45).

The suburban area in which I conducted my research has a relatively high degree of early school leavers compared to other suburbs in the southern region, and, as my research discovers, a high degree of low self-esteem and lack of expectations of success among the young people. Freire (2000) notes a similar occurrence among the indigenous

population of Brazil. He writes, “Self-deprecation is another characteristic of the oppressed, which derives from their internalization of the opinion the oppressors hold of them” (p. 45).

Freire, father and daughter Ana, (Freire & Freire, 2004) in *Pedagogy of Hope* talk of the different styles of expository lessons. They criticise those teachers who see themselves as the sole source of education for the students and forget about the influences of home and culture. They criticise the classroom that stops critical thinking but praises the classroom where the teacher provides an amount of knowledge then everyone in the room, including the teacher, analyses the presentation and understanding. For them therefore, “teaching is a creative act, a critical act, and not a mechanical one. The curiosity of the teacher and the students, in action, meet on the basis of teaching-learning” (p. 68).

An earlier work by Freire (2001) *Pedagogy of Freedom,* focuses on the teacher-student relationship and places an emphasis on the continued professional development of teachers. Freire suggests that “Teachers who do not take their own education seriously, who do not study, who make little effort to keep abreast of events have no moral authority to co-ordinate the activities of the classroom” (p. 85).

He explains the need for teachers to show respect for their students and respect for themselves, to motivate the students to overcome any difficulties, to instigate the student to become capable of comprehension and to have the ability to communicate what has been comprehended. Freire admits he has “never been able to separate the teaching of contents from the ethical education of the students, as if they were disconnected moments (p. 87). He emphasizes that the teaching profession requires the unity of both a technical

dimension and a firm defence of dialogical ethics. This ethical posture leads professionals to improve their work with the whole educational community on the basis of the education people want and need for their children (p. 22).

While Freire's words are about the indigenous Brazilian farmers, they have been used to describe other groups in our society and, in some cases, based on my personal experience, by teachers in regard to their students. I believe that early school leavers can also benefit from an education curriculum based around their experiences and which gradually introduces them to positive successes. My reason for such a belief is based around a two-year experimental group at one particular senior college in the northern suburban area of my research. This group was made up from those year 11 and year 12 students who, in the opinion of their teachers, were likely to either leave school before the end of year 12 or be placed in circumstances where they may be asked to leave. Unfortunately, there was no written report on the results of this experiment and it was discontinued due to lack of funding. My observations of the program, as school administrator, was that changes to the students' interest, demeanour and involvement were extremely positive and from forty eight students only eight left before the end of year 12. Of the eight, one was asked to leave and the others gained employment. In previous years the same school had lost an average of thirty-two students each year.

The teacher of this small group draws from his compassion for his students and his creative outlook on life. He expects not their passive behaviour, rather he invites them to be active and creative with him. As I observed him with this group I saw him treating them as young adults and involving them in every step of the course planning. He engaged them in building a barbeque area for the school. They had to plan the entire

project, cost the materials, build a small model and then invite me, as the school administrator, to see the model and listen to their reasons for building it in the school environment. These same students who had been marked down as potential early leavers went on to design and build seating for the elderly in a local park. These were not ordinary seats but designed and shaped in the form of a eucalyptus leaf. To me this teacher, was akin to the open-minded teacher of Freire, "The open-minded teacher cannot afford to ignore anything that concerns the human person" (2001, p. 121).

This is why we need to accentuate the positive with all students and, in particular, with potential early school leavers. There is also a need to build strong, supportive relationships between teacher and student. Freire writes about knowing and understanding students, especially the socio-geographical context of the school and which location the students come from (p. 121).

Thus, he draws my attention fully to the responsibility I have in regard to the surveys, questions and interviews in my study. I find ways to safeguard the autonomy, confidentiality, privacy and human dignity of participants in my enquiry through orienting myself toward them in ways that are mindful, open, honest, and respectful of all young people as dignified human beings. Freire has a big influence on my thinking and the illumination of my own motivation. The values for my motivation are based on the belief that all teachers have an ethical responsibility to young people. Freire speaks of his ethics as,

> … that which feels itself betrayed and neglected by the hypocritical perversion of an elitist purity, an ethic affronted by racial, sexual, and class discrimination.

> For the sake of this ethic, which is inseparable from educative practice, we should struggle, whether our work is with children, youth, or adults. (p. 24)

Freire insists that because we have an ethical responsibility for our actions in the world, it is then in our hands to remain passive or to do something. Therefore, educators need to open possibilities so that all people can exercise their basic human right of developing their culture while getting the best education. My way of knowing what to look for was based purely on observation and an intuition from having been there myself. That is, from having been in the world of education, which did not suit me, and my behavioural or social needs. I was hoping my research would clarify these issues for me.

Dewey and friendship

It is almost over one hundred years since John Dewey's educational theories were presented in such books as *My Pedagogic Creed* (1897), *The School and Society* (1900), *The Child and the Curriculum* (1902), *Democracy and Education* (1916), *Experience and Education* (1938) and *Creative Democracy- The Task Before Us* (1939), yet several of his recurrent themes are true for the 21st century and the problem of early school leavers. Dewey in *Experience and Education* (1938) argued that education and learning must be both a social and interactive process. He encouraged education systems and teachers to allow students to interact with the curriculum and take a major part in their own learning. Dewey did not see the student as a blank slate. Instead, he suggested that students organise fact-based comprehension through building onto prior positive

experiences, preconceptions, and knowledge, and therefore, the educator's role is in creating an educative experience (Dewey, 1938, p. 71).

Dewey (1897), stated in *My Pedagogic Creed*, (reprinted on the web page http://www.infed.org/archives/e-texts/e-dew-pc.htm) that the purpose of education should not be centred on the acquisition of skills but rather the realisation of our full potential and the ability to use the skills we learn for the greater good. In Article One of *My Pedagogic Creed,* Dewey declares that it is impossible to prepare the student for unknown future civilisation conditions but

> "to prepare him for the future life means to give him command of himself; it means so to train him that he will have the full and ready use of all his capacities; that his eye and ear and hand may be tools ready to command, that his judgment may be capable of grasping the conditions under which it has to work, and the executive forces be trained to act economically and efficiently"(Dewey, 2014).

In *The Child and the Curriculum* (1902), Dewey discusses educational pedagogy in particular pedagogy centred on the subject matter to be taught. He argues that the major flaw in a "chalk and talk" methodology is the inactivity of the student. Within this particular framework, "the child is simply the immature being who is to be matured; he is the superficial being who is to be deepened" (Dewey, 1902, p. 22). Dewey argues the content of the curriculum must be able to be related to lived experience. Further, Dewey states

> Learning is active. It involves reaching out of the mind. It involves organic assimilation starting from within. Literally, we must take our stand with the

> child and our departure from him. It is he and not the subject-matter which determines both quality and quantity of learning. (p. 22)

Further, he says that we cannot minimise the importance of the content nor the role of the teacher.

In order to rectify this confluence of content, teacher and the lived experience of the student, Dewey advocated for an educational structure that strikes a balance between delivering knowledge while also taking into account the interests and experiences of the student. He notes, "the child and the curriculum are simply two limits which define a single process. Just as two points define a straight line, so the present standpoint of the child and the facts and truths of studies define instruction" (p. 27).

Dewey became an important influence in the development of teachers and teaching skills, his concept of hands-on learning and experiential education are considered to be the basis of problem based learning, a teaching method used today. He was very careful to indicate the importance of the role of the teacher as a guide and facilitator in *My Pedagogic Creed,* Article III,

> The teacher is not in the school to impose certain ideas or to form certain habits in the child, but is there as a member of the community to select the influences which shall affect the child and to assist him in properly responding to these influences. (Dewey, 2014)

The emphasis for me to make here as I explore the influences of Gadamer, Bohm, Freire and now Dewey, particularly in relation to my living and being an educator-

researcher, is to reflect upon the role that Dewey has for dialogue in education. Dewey, according to Naoko Saito, called for a continuing re-education of young people and adults so that they could transcend their existing circles in order to “experience the world in all of its potential intensity.” He called for this in the name of re-awakening the intensity of impulse we lose when our internal light dims and risks extinction, and in the name of obtaining peace and courage to attain the intensity and attain it again "in the midst of effort", only "in action, not after" (Saito, 2006, pp. 144-145).

In a reading of Saito’s (2006), *The Gleam of Light: Moral Perfectionism and Education in Dewey and Emerson*, I find ways to explain Dewey's influence on my growth as a researcher of life. Following Dewey, I can come to understand the classroom as a place for action in the midst of effort, action that cultivates patient listening and imaginative seeing, and embracing multiple opportunities and occasions for dialogue that might allow young people to resist the insistent and incessant threats to suppressing that internal light, and with it, their intelligence and genius in their coming fully into their worlds. The classroom can potentially become a mutual forum for transcending social, economic and cultural boundaries, converting past loss and imagining and creating optimistic, personal and relational futures. According to Saito, Dewey suggests it is in this kind of dialogue that students and teachers come to acquire a sense of responsibility to their own words, and learn what it means to join and live in a community of words.

Communication, according to Saito’s understanding of Dewey, is a condition for growth. In a way that echoes Gadamer, Bohm and Freire, Dewey says, “communication insures participation in a common understanding” and develops the idea that communication is not simply a matter of skill or means, but rather an art for creating a

democratic community (Saito, 2006, p. 151). I like to think that this would be a participative community in which there is tactfully expressed respect for each member's historicity, autobiographical narratives, losses, dreams, learning, aspirations, differences and hopes, and in which friendship is a condition. Dewey says this about the idea of friendship in community.

> [D]emocracy as a way of life is controlled by personal faith in personal day-by-day working together with others. Democracy is the belief that even when needs and ends or consequences are different for each individual, the habit of amicable cooperation—which may include, as in sport, rivalry and competition—is itself a price-less addition to life. To take as far as possible every conflict which arises—and they are bound to arise—out of the atmosphere and medium of force, of violence as a means of settlement into that of discussion and of intelligence is to treat those who disagree—even profoundly—with us as those from whom we may learn, and in so far, as friends…To cooperate by giving differences a chance to show themselves because of the belief that the expression of difference is not only a right of the other persons but is a means of enriching one's own life-experience, is inherent in the democratic personal way of life. (*Creative Democracy*, p. 228 in Saito, p. 151)

This could be the community of the classroom. Dewey's idea of friendship is one that describes, for me, my aspiration for living my life with others and for living in friendship with my students. I have come in living the life of my inquiry to embrace my capacity for opening the hand of friendship to those I encounter. I aim to be with the participants in my inquiry in ways that allow occasions for mutual understanding, and

openness to difference to emerge and be expressed in conversations amongst friends. My wish is that in forming trusting relationships amongst us, momentum might release for boundaries of loss and despair, amongst those of us who lost school early because school lost us, to be traversed, and then converted into vistas of possibilities for belonging in community.

Gadamer, Bohm, Freire and Dewey were to provide the basis and style I would use in my dialogue with the members of the three discussion groups. I wanted to hold a dialogue rather than a question/answer approach with the groups and individuals. I determined to remain aware of my values and beliefs and not interpret what the participants say from my bias. Freire's story (2004, p.17) about the meeting with a group of farmers when he was asked by one if he knew them and where they lived, became very important for me to remember when I was to speaking with my participants. Gadamer, Bohm, Freire and Dewey gave me inspirational guidance for approaching the dialogues I wished to initiate with my three discussion groups. I now intended to hold a dialogue with the young people rather than confront them with a set of questions for which they would provide the answers.

My research yielded a large amount of data and many personal stories. The unfolding of this information was difficult. Bohm (1985) expresses this concept in his discussion on the unfolding of that which is enfolded. He says,

> … the light from all parts of the room contains information about the whole room… otherwise we wouldn't be able to understand what the room was—the fact is that there is a whole room, and we see the whole room from each part. (p. 11)

Personal Stories

Personal stories, anecdotal as they may appear, and so perhaps seen by some as not that valuable, actually lie at the heart of sharing lived experience. In the introductory to Jane Gallop's book on anecdotal theory (2002) there is poignant justification for the anecdotal reporting in this thesis "*Anecdotal Theory* cuts through these oppositions to produce theory with a sense of humor, theorizing which honors the uncanny detail of lived experience" (Gallop, 2002, p. 2).

Maybe it is important for young people to theorise about their lived experience. Gallop (2002) proposes that in our telling a story and thinking a story through we experience "an impetus for theorising" (p.16). Is this not what helps us all make sense of ourselves? Why would I not attempt to help young people make sense of themselves in this way?

Through permitting anecdotes to be disclosed in my data, I am not intending to generalise a case or cases based on anecdotal evidence. As van Manen says,

> … empirical generalization is not the aim of phenomenological research. The point that the critics of anecdotes miss is that the anecdote is to be valued for other than factual-empirical or factual-historical reasons. An historical account describes a thing that has happened in the past, but an anecdote is rather like a poetic narrative which describes universal truth (van Manen, 1990).

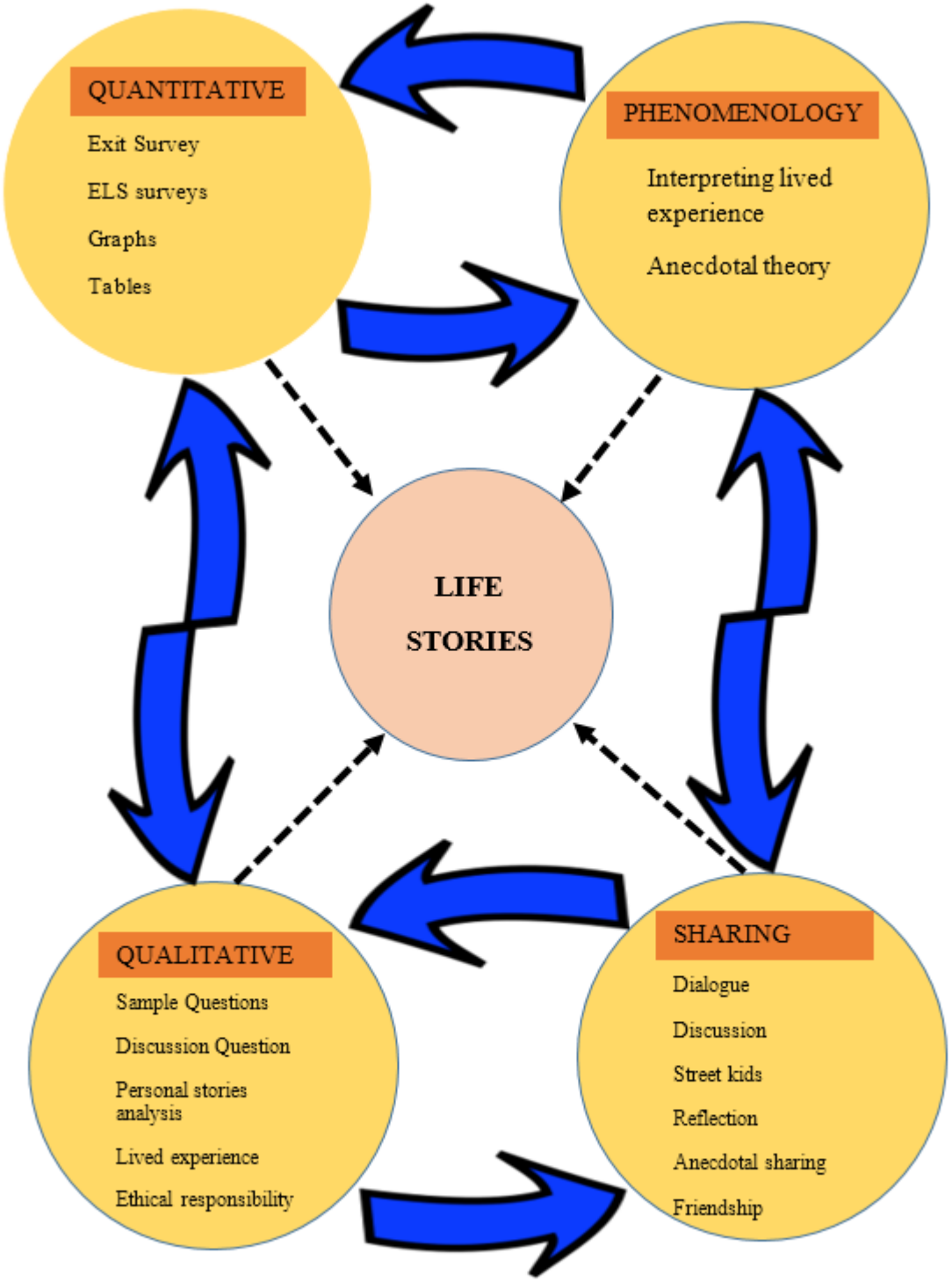
There is something in an anecdote genuinely shared with a trust that speaks a truth one cannot ignore. I believe we cannot ignore the truths that disclose themselves in the stories young people tell. Anecdotes according to van Manen can be compelling, lead us to reflect, involve us personally, transform (be touched, shared, moved, taught), and

measure one's interpretive sense (p.121). Thus I lace anecdotal evidence into my conceptual framework.

The conceptual structure for this thesis developed in Chapter One, Emerging Conceptual Framework 1, evolved as my interpreting of the data progressed into the deeper understandings I came to through the scholarly reading, reflection and through the practice of conversation, dialogue and collecting narratives as I have shown in this chapter. Emerging conceptual Framework 2 adds more clarification for the analyses and interpretation of findings from the data to be presented in Chapters Five through to Eight.

I needed to try to create the conversations, to use feedback and data to see the whole lived experience of the early school leavers from each part of their lives. There were seventeen different themes obtained from the stories and data, such as, family influence and illicit drugs. From the analysis of the research, it emerged that I could gather the different themes under four chapters, family, school, attitude and behaviour, and responsibilities, which form the basis of my analysis in Chapters Five to Eight.

Figure 6 Emerging Conceptual Framework Two



EMERGING CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK 2

Chapter Five

Early School Leavers and Family

It is widely recognised by education researchers that if pupils are to maximise their potential from schooling they will need the full support of their parents, teachers and society. Attempts to enhance parental involvement in education occupy governments, administrators, educators and parents' organisations in all countries. Society anticipates that parents should play a role in not only the promotion of their own children's achievements but more broadly in school improvement and the democratisation of school governance. The European Commission, for example, holds that the degree of parental participation is a significant indicator of the quality of schooling (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003).

While family was one of the strong categories that young people valued, many of them held a diverse concept of what made up a family. Most had contact with a variety of family structures such as single-parent families, two-parent families, families run by a guardian and families where both parents were of the same gender. It appears to me that young people were non-judgemental concerning the family structure of their friends.

According to Fiona Stanley (2008), children who have positive early childhood experiences in a stimulating and nurturing environment will have better outcomes throughout their lives. The earlier they have some positive experiences the better will be their school years, self-esteem and health. They are also less likely to be teen parents, use drugs or be involved in crime (Stanley, 2008, p. 80).

Stanley (2008) writes of human capital and the need for strong levels of human capital in young people. The strength of family relationships is important for this positive

capital. Given the change in family structure in the past twenty years, it is important that changed family circumstances are assisted by society, counselling and the school. As Stanley adds, “We now need to look beyond the family to neighbourhoods, workplaces, the social and economic environment…” (p. 80).

There has been a marked change in society even in the past twenty or thirty years, the hours both parents work and the structure of those work hours has impacted on family life, the family structure, the availability of child care services and parental contact with young people (Wise, 2003). The stress on families of the odd work hours and income insecurity, the technological changes that have occurred, the breakdown of families into new models and the growth in domestic violence due to stress or substance abuse have all contributed to a lessening of family influence and assistance for students. Stanley (2008) says “... people in more disadvantaged circumstances have more problems, are less healthy, have less opportunities to succeed than those in advantaged circumstances” (p. 81).

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), there has not been a proportional increase in jobs of 38 to 40 hours per week to keep up with the growth in the work force. The ABS records over 300 per cent increase in jobs of a casual nature, of less than 15 hours or from 50 to 60 hours. Therefore, it would appear families are expected to either work less hours, with little job security, for a lower total income or they are expected to work greater hours and have less time for children than their parents did in the past (ABS, 2006).

Effort it takes to collaborate

Collaboration between parents and the school takes a lot of time and effort. It is a very effective way of assisting students to achieve their maximum success in school. Sandra Christenson and Susan Sheridan (2001) say that if this is a dynamic and active process then both parties will be able to work together to find a solution to any problem. "The school-to-home transmission model attempts to enlist parents to support the school's mission as its primary goal. This model assumes that children's achievement is fostered by continuity of expectations and values across home and school" (p. 92).

While it is easy to imagine the home and the school as being two different systems with separate roles and responsibilities, any close partnership will impact upon performance, behaviour, attendance and self-esteem. "In order for a successful home-school collaboration to develop, parents and educators must identify, break down, and remove barriers which may impede the process" (Faust-Horne, 2003, p. 5).

Classroom experience indicates that with some parents the only time you see them is when the student has behavioural problems rather than academic performance problems.

> Schools and teachers need to re-examine their misconceptions about the ways families support children's learning, fear of reaching out to families due to cultural or linguistic differences, stereotypes about poor, minority families, and/or pitying families for their situations and therefore holding lower expectations for children's performance (Esler, Godber, & Christenson, 2002, p. 396).

Without this re-examination and a concerted effort by schools and teachers it is possible families of children at risk will not see they are welcome in the collaborative action of education. The initial communication connection must be started by the school, as often parents do not know how to make the connection. The sooner a home-school link is established in a child's education then the more welcome parents will feel and the better the performance of the child (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003).

Participation by both the parent and the teacher is essential for collaboration. Responsibility lies with the teacher/school to establish a system and climate that encourages the initial collaboration. Often schools only indicate covertly, that a parent's role is in fundraising or coaching sports teams.

The collaboration established by the school must be pro-active and with an established system of safeguards to ensure that parents feel they are welcome and encouraged to take up an offer of in-school involvement during the day-to-day school program. Steps to establish the rights of the child when a parent is involved in the school must be undertaken. Some students may feel pressure if parents are in the class program too often. Parent classes run by the school outside school hours will help parents understand current educational trends and methods. Parent/teacher interviews have indicated that a parental response in some situations is "I can't help them at home because you do it differently than when I went to school."

Child safety requirements indicate a need to have all volunteers, ancillary staff and teachers undergo a police check or a similar community check. In addition to child-related employment legislation (where it exists), all Australian states and territories have legislation that requires people who wish to register in certain occupations (for example

teachers, doctors or childcare workers) to be screened for criminal offences. This means that even in jurisdictions where child-related employment legislation does not exist there are still requirements for adults working in certain occupations to undergo screening (such as, the *Victorian Institute of Teaching Act 2001* [Vic.]; the *Medical Practitioners Registration Act 2001* [Qld]; the *Child Care Act 2001* [Tas.]) (Berlyn, Holzer, & Higgins, 2011, p. 3).

By not only allowing but encouraging parental ownership of the educational program in which their child is involved parents will see the need for a strong community which provides an enriching experience. "School communities, thus, become centres for growth for children, adults, and community leaders. A renewed sense of purpose is made possible through the patterns and processes of constructivist leadership" (Bauch, 2001, p. 218).

A change in mindset caused by these links will serve as a means of overcoming the commonly held belief by families at risk that they do not have the skills or academic ability to be positive contributors in collaborating. "Effective collaboration with families creates avenues for parents to pursue initiatives that may not stem from educators but are still viewed by parents as critical in fostering a proactive learning environment" (Esler et al., 2002, p. 394).

Family triggers that lead to early school leaving

Amy Esler, Yvonne Godber, and Sandra Christenson present a list of basic standards to assist family involvement. This list (see Appendix 1, p. 287), includes meaningful two-way communication, development of positive parenting skills, how to assist learning,

how to be involved in school decision making and how to use community resources to strengthen educative links (Esler et al., 2002, p. 394). They propose that open and frank dialogue with parents will reveal the barriers that may exist, or be perceived to exist, which hinder close collaboration and that schools may have a hidden curriculum that does not encourage student and parent involvement. Reluctance to collaborate soon becomes a family tradition and alters attitudes to schooling.

In a 2010 report by the charity organisation Mission Australia, 76.2 per cent of Tasmanian respondents, aged between 11 and 19 years of age, indicated that family relationships were so important they ranked it number one on what they valued the most (Mission Australia, 2010, p. 98). In the same report the top three issues of concern for Tasmanian respondents were body image, stress and school problems (Mission Australia, 2010, p. 100). Family conflict ranked highly, along with bullying. The 2008 Mission Australia research indicated that approximately 9 per cent of students who are thinking about leaving school would do so because of family related issues such as family violence, poor finances and adverse parental influence about schooling.

Therefore, in comparison to the Brooks et al. report of 1997 there appears to be a decreased emphasis on family factors as a reason for leaving school early. When this point was raised with each of the three discussion groups I met with as part of my research the general consensus was that while families are highly valued there were other factors which had a greater influence on a final decision. *"My mother was always changing partners and I had brothers and a sister from different fathers. I only became angry if one of the men tried to tell me what to do or was violent with my mum. The family structure and environment did not encourage or assist my study habits and I*

usually spent time hanging about with my mates. The age difference between me and my brothers and sisters also presented problems as I was often expected to stay home and look after the younger ones if they were unwell as mum had to go to work" (Bill).

As Brooks et al. (1997) point out, it may be a combination of the many family problems that 'triggers' factors which lead to early school leaving (p. 9). For this inquiry, I have chosen not to include discussions of psychological factors relating to early school leavers because I am not a trained psychologist or counsellor. I also believe that discussions of a psychological nature are not part of my research field.

Families are important to the long-term outcomes of young people. The provision of a safe and encouraging home environment is crucial to development through to adolescence. The ways in which the home environment promotes and encourages learning during these years will influence educational outcomes (Dale, 2010).

Paula Mance and Peng Yu (2010), using data from the *Youth in Focus* survey (Breunig, Cobb-Clark, Gørgens, & Sartbayeva, 2007), indicated that family structure had an impact on young people becoming an early school leaver. Their research showed that by the end of year 11, 15 per cent of young people from a nuclear family, 29 per cent of young people from lone parent families, 35 per cent of young people from a step-father family and 47 per cent of young people from a step-mother family would leave school before the completion of year 12 (Mance & Yu, 2010, p. 87). However, Mance and Yu further suggest that after considering other factors, such as neighbourhood and individual characteristics, the effects of family structure on academic achievement are diminished.

Roger Dale (2010) stated that research has found early school leavers more often come from families with poor parenting skills. His research found that low aspirations

for children, lack of supervision, less parental engagement with the school and a lack of communication within the family were among the factors affecting the decision to not complete school (p. 19).

Mariah Evans and Jonathan Kelley (2001) completed research into the effects of divorce on a child's educational attainment. As their main independent variable they used the fact that the divorce occurred by the time the child was 14 years old. Their research also looked at other factors such as parental education levels, moving residence, parent religion, ethnic background and father's occupation. Evans and Kelley's modelling resulted in a finding of an increased impact of divorce on children's level of educational attainment and a probability of completing year 12.

Norwegian research by Fiona Steele, Wendy Sigle-Rushton and Øystein Kravdal (2009) found that children who experience divorce early in life are more likely to have lower educational attainment, especially if the divorce occurs when the child is young.

Blow, Goodman, Walker, and Windmeijer (2005) conducted a study in the United Kingdom on parental background and what affect this had on child future outcomes such as poverty and well-being (Archambault, 2008). In this study they looked at low socio-economic families and questioned whether government providing a better income is a solution to the child's future outcome or whether associations between parental incomes and future child outcomes could be due to other factors such as poor parenting skills, poor financial management, the neighbourhood, or the quality of the school the student attends. In this report they indicate that permanent parental income increases are an important influence on whether a child stays on at school or not (p. 1). Blow et al state that a "10 per cent rise in permanent income induces approximately a 2 percentage point

rise (ppt) for boys and a 1.3 ppt rise for girls in the probability of attaining 5+ GCSE's and in the probability of staying on post-16" (p. 8).

They found, however, that increases in child benefit allowances did not reach the intended goal and were often spent on such things as tobacco, alcohol and adult clothing. "Our basic results find rejections of the restriction that the marginal propensities to spend out of CB (Child benefits) and other income are the same, and these rejections arise for *adult* assignable goods (such as alcohol and women's clothing), and not for child assignable goods" (Blow et al., 2005, p. 10).

Factors of socio-economic disadvantage and status

Income is not the only measure available to determine a child's welfare position and socio-economic status. In their study on material depravation in OECD countries, Romina Boarini and Marco Mira d'Ercole (2006) looked at various factors related to lack of material benefits.

> Further, income measures do not provide a full picture of command over resources: they neglect individuals' ability to borrow, to draw from accumulated savings and to benefit from help provided by the family or friends, as well as consumption of public services such as education, health and housing. For these reasons, income provides only a partial description of the individual's ability to enjoy an acceptable life (p. 10).

Jacqueline Homel, Astghik Mavisakalyan, Ha Trong Nguyen, Chris Ryan (2012), in their research report used data gathered from the *Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth* (Y03) results and the *Youth in Focus* survey results to complete their research on

family background and school completion. By doing this, Homel et al. have broadened the measures used to obtain a multi-dimensional understanding of the nature of disadvantage. This broad view takes into account the cultural and material aspects of young peoples' disadvantage and how these influence the students' performance at school. The use of a multi-dimensional understanding rather than the one-dimensional concept of disadvantage often used, such as income or the Australian Henderson poverty line, give a much broader understanding of the background of students who may not complete year 12, for example, what are the reasons behind a family's poverty?

There has been much debate on income levels and socio-economic position as a measure of family involvement in schools and whether social exclusion should be used instead (Duffy, 1995; Levitas, 2007; Saunders, Naidoo, & Griffiths, 2007). The problem, which then arises, is the definition of "social exclusion" used by researchers and the determinants used to reach their definition.

> In line with overseas studies, social exclusion has been identified using a range of indicators (27 in total). Three different forms of exclusion have been distinguished:
>
> Disengagement – lack of participation in social and community activities
>
> Service exclusion – lack of adequate access to key services when needed
>
> Economic exclusion – restricted access to economic resources and low economic capacity (Saunders et al., 2007, p. ix)

Peter Saunders, Yuvisthi Naidoo and Megan Griffiths (2007) set out to use their research to establish Australia's first national profile of poverty, depravation and social

exclusion in order to obtain new indicators on disadvantage and to identify what can be done about it.

> These three over-lapping concepts – poverty (defined in terms of low income), deprivation and social exclusion – underlie the research on which this report is based. Its basic underlying premise is that *social disadvantage takes many different forms, and the identification and measurement of poverty and other forms of disadvantage must be grounded in the actual living standards and experiences of people in poverty* (Saunders et al., 2007, p. 2).

Apart from the direct effect of family income on students' health, lifestyle and living conditions there is also an indirect effect on school retention (Archambault, 2008). Taking the research (Archambault, 2008) (Blow et al., 2005) a step further low socio-economic status will affect subject choice. Within the Tasmanian State Education system there has been an increase in "the user pays" principle in regard to electives chosen at school. With the increased charges for materials comes a decision by some families that a particular elective subject is no longer an option because of increased fees. The cost of books, uniform, excursions, camps and electives at school, and Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) have meant the exclusion of some young people from participation in educational opportunities offered by the school. While schools do have computers and there are access centres in libraries, some students have an advantage of home access to complete work. Schools have a limited budget, and therefore, must decide on what is included in a "free" education and what is not.

From the data I collected, and the interviews I conducted with current and former students, it appears that family background has much to do with interest in school,

disengagement from school and society, and who these young people see themselves as, that is, their identity or ability to belong to a group. Because the suburban area in which this research is located has a range of incomes, values and family structures, it was very difficult to ascertain the circumstances of all families or their attitude to education. The best indicators came from the interviews and follow-up sessions. From the ELSSs, I was able to discover that over 2 per cent of students believed their parents could not afford to continue with their education. At the same time, 7 per cent believed parents would influence their decision to stay on until year 12 in a negative way and 7 per cent believed financial burden and pressures on families is a reason for leaving, and 1 per cent believed their parents wanted them to leave school.

Comparing data analysis and finding new perspectives

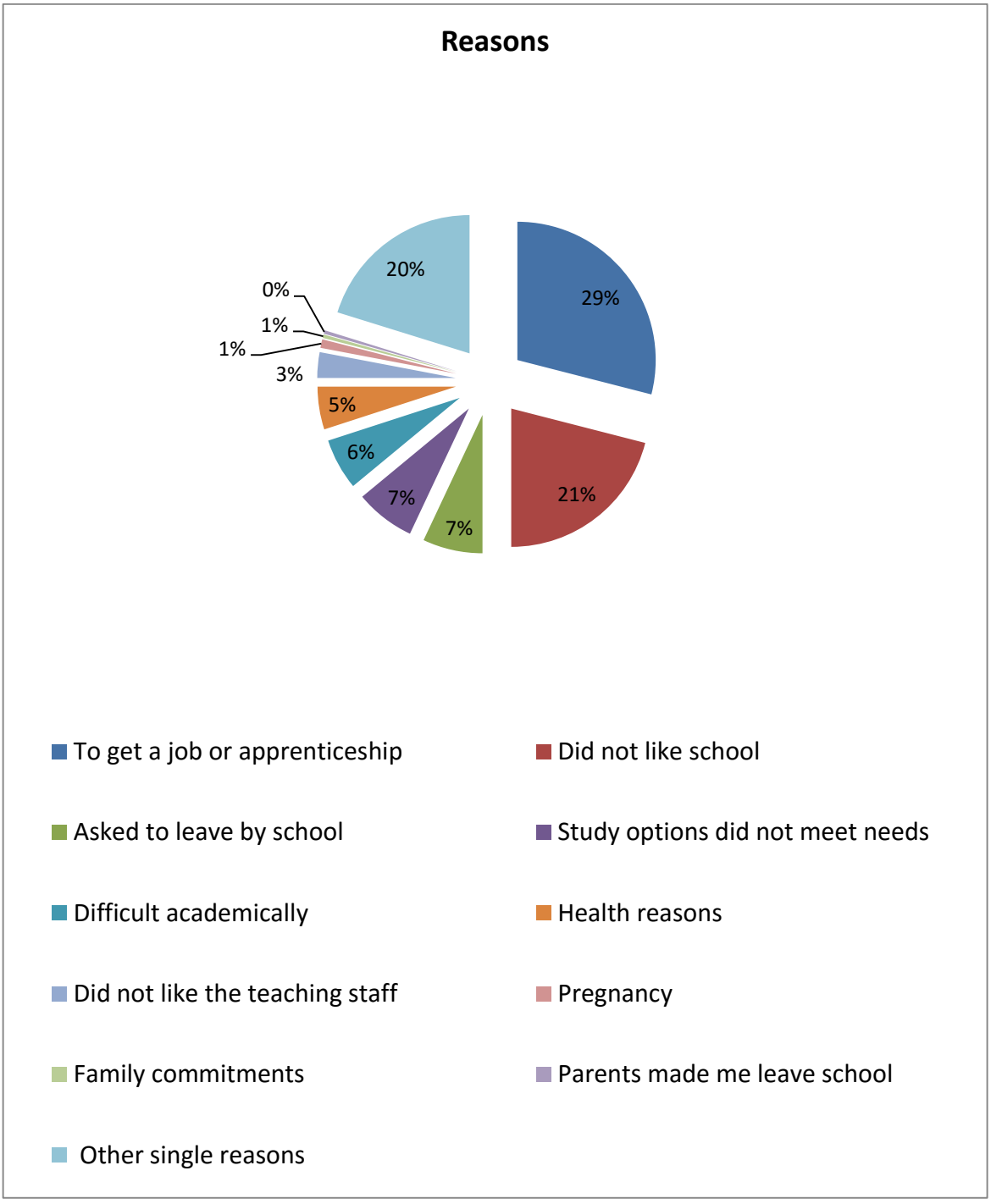
From the results of my analysis, I wanted to gauge the uniqueness of my results apropos those of other researchers. From various results I read from other researchers many identified similar factors to mine but did not present them in a way I could use them to make a direct comparison with my results. I found a study from Queensland that mirrors many but not all of the reasons for leaving school early that I found in this suburb. The findings of the Queensland study were not categorised, displayed or explained in the manner of my analytic and interpretative presentation. I believe the way I present the graphic data here offers different ways to access meaning and give meaning to the veracity of the data that reflect the lived experience of the participants in the surveys.

From the 1200 ‘usable’ results of the 1500 year 9 to year 12 students surveyed I was able to derive the following graph. Note, not all who took part in the ELSS answered

every question. Research for this thesis indicates that factors such as parental influence, financial pressure on both parents and students and a desire to leave home account for over 33 per cent of the reasons for leaving school early. In the report on destinations of early school leavers in Queensland (2011), respondents gave a number of reasons for leaving in reply to a survey by the state Department of Education, Training and Employment. I have reproduced some of their responses below.

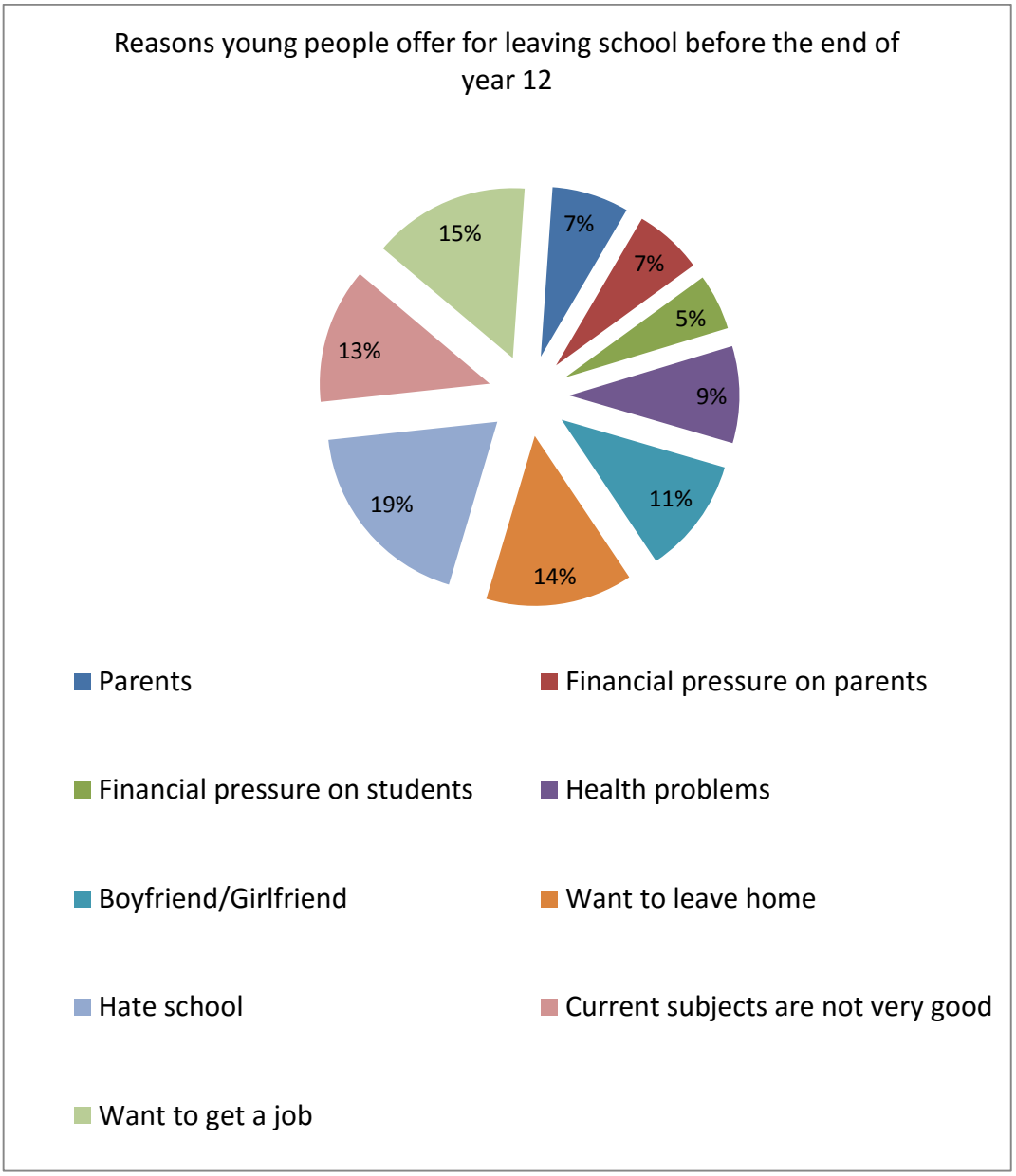
Although the responses differ between Tasmania and Queensland, the weighting to “get a job” and “didn’t like school” are similar, parental influence and wanting to leave home was given more weight in Tasmania. In Tasmania, there is a link between the desire to leave home and the perception that life on the mainland of Australia is more exciting and filled with more opportunities.

Graph 1 Reason offered by young people for leaving school in Queensland



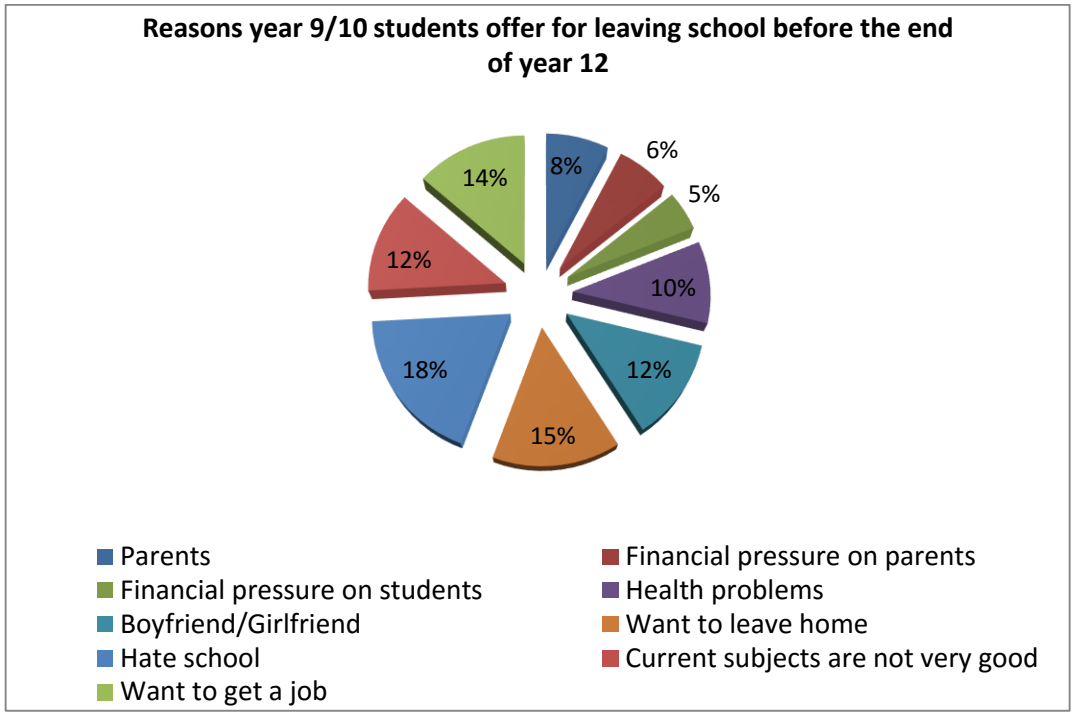
(Department of Education Training and Employment, 2011)

Graph 2 Reasons for leaving school early given in ELSS One

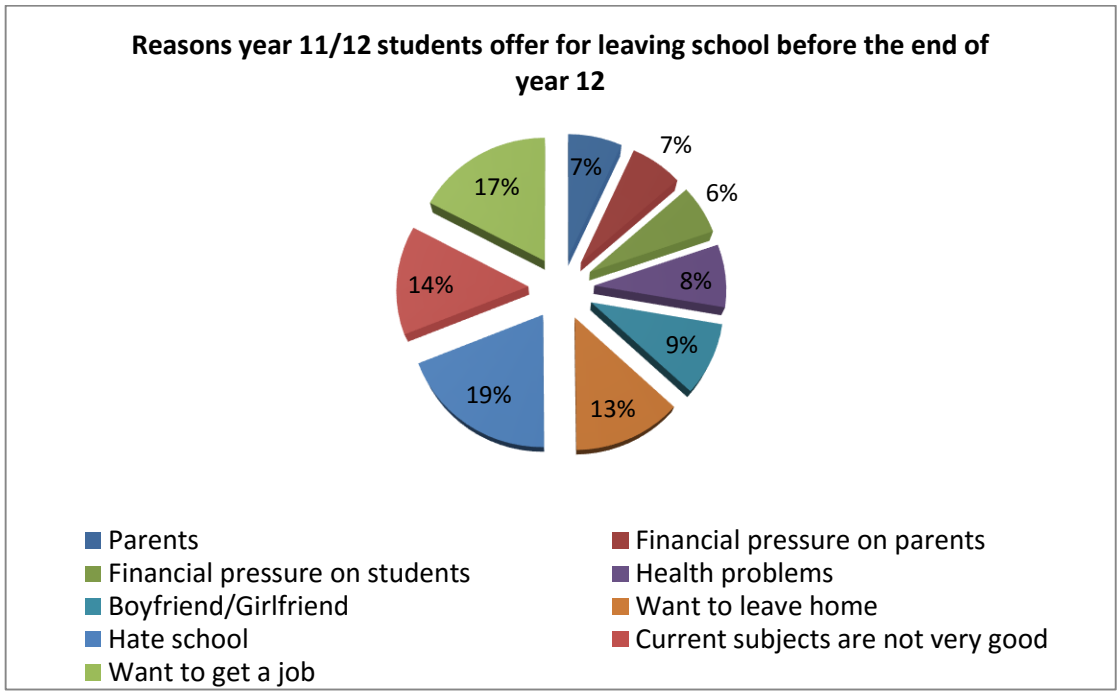


Dividing the information into year clusters produces similar results to those in Graph 3, which may indicate that by the end of year 8 students have established a view about schooling.

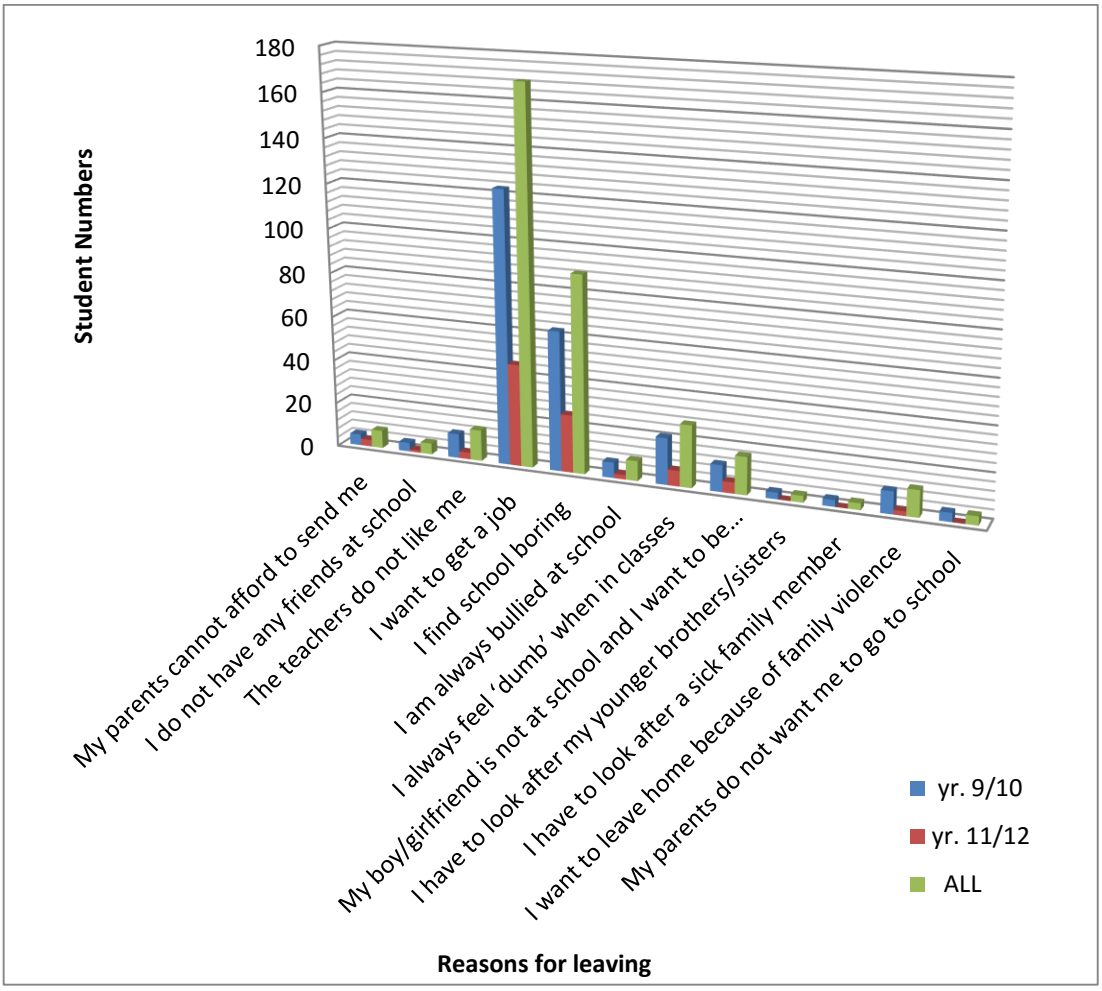
Graph 3 Reasons given by year 9 and 10 students



Graph 4 Reasons given by year 11 and 12 students



Graph 5 Explanations for leaving school



Some of these numbers are not large and they may come from the same students. At best, seventy students believed they cannot stay at school because of parental pressure, at worst, out of approximately 1200 year 9 to 12 students surveyed, over one hundred and ninety two students from this suburb will not attend year 12 because of their family financial situation. The major concern from the ELSSs responses represented above were the similarities between each year group and the increased percentages for "finding school boring" and "wanting to get a job". The total number of secondary students in this suburban area is 2530 (ABS 2010). Therefore, almost 10 per cent want to leave school

by year 9. From a total population of 43132 (ABS, 2010b) only 9081 reached year 12. Over 1200 members of this group did not go past year 9.

Ethnographic thick descriptions

In this chapter I include, analysis of surveys, and comparison with other research and now I turn to narrative recording of individual student commentary made in survey forms, or given to me in interviews and discussion groups. Using a variety of ethnographic approaches thick descriptions have emerged that can be shown to reveal the truthful state of the family lifeworlds of early school leavers. Norman Denzin (2001) elaborated on the term "thick descriptions" that Clifford Geertz introduced in his anthropological research during the 1970s having adapted it from the work of philosopher and Gilbert Ryle (1968).

> A thick description … does more than record what a person is doing. It goes beyond mere fact and surface appearances. It presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another. Thick description evokes emotionality and self-feelings. It inserts history into experience. It establishes the significance of an experience, or the sequence of events, for the person or persons in question. In thick description, the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard (p. 100).

Here thick description of relationships between early school leavers and families appear through the voices of participants. Family background can have both positive and

negative influences according to the students interviewed. If the rest of the family have 'done well' their parents place pressure on them to achieve to the same standard. Jo, a young girl who left school in year 11, said the reason she left was because of family arguments. "*My sister had performed very well academically and had been a student leader in the school. I could not do the academic work and my father said it was because I did not study enough or spent too much time on Facebook (an online social network). He wanted me to be like my sister. This led to further arguments and even some resentment of my sister. My father kept selecting my subjects to try to force me to attend a university even though I knew I was not suited to university study."*

Likewise, if the family have an attitude of "get out and work", this can place pressure on students who would like to stay on but whose parents want them to work. Two of the young people interviewed indicated they had tried to stay at school and pay their own fees but in the end had to leave because their parents insisted they work at a local industry. A small group of current and former students did not show any interest in trying to achieve because they believed the family business would look after them. Again this figure was small (only 2 per cent) but in the number of students surveyed or interviewed this accounted for thirty-six students.

From the surveys I conducted, it was difficult to determine family connectedness, however, during the interviews this became clearer. The discussions with the group who saw themselves as street kids, gave evidence that out of this group only two had sustained contact with their family. By the very nature of how they saw themselves and as they were either living on the streets or with friends on a random basis, this is about what you would expect. They said no contact with parents was a good thing but they would often

catch up with their siblings if they had any still living at home. The other two interview groups indicated a wide range of family connectedness. Some students had left home and were working part-time in order to pay for accommodation because they could not remain at home. This created further problems in their attempts to try to balance work with full-time study as well as run a household.

An example of this is Sarah, a year 12 student at the time. "*I had left home because I could not get along with my mother's new boyfriend. After a number of confrontations, I moved to my own apartment and expanded my part-time work to 34 hours per week in order to pay for rent, food and utilities. I was also trying to pay something off my school fees and attend classes. My teachers would get angry because I missed classes or did not keep up with the work because I was tired."*

According to the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (2005) a study of the non-completion of schooling was associated with lower socio-economic status and family background but also depended on whether the school was classified as 'academic,' or 'non-academic'. Many within the wider community accept socio-economic status as a measure of an individual's or group's standing in the community, hence the derogatory terms or names often given to people from lower socio-economic areas (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2005). Among students in Hobart, often young people refer to those from lower socio-economic areas as "chiggers" or "bogans". The NSW (2005) study found it usually relates to the income, occupation, educational attainment and wealth of either an individual or a group such as the suburb in which this research took place. Peter McInerney (2006), in a thesis presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) conference, said that dominant

discussions on youth alienation and underachievement are generally treated as a "blame game" with responsibility for the problems being given to either students, their family, their neighbourhood, teachers and the school or the public education system. He goes on to say that what is missing from this argument is a detailed examination of the structural inequalities already in society and which sustain educational disadvantage (McInerney, 2006).

Structural inequalities arise, not because of differences between people, but because of meanings and values applied to these differences that are in turn, systematised by society. When people are visibly different, and this is deemed to render them of a lower, or no value, it can lead to forms of covert or unintended discrimination. A simple example would be access to ICT in the home. Some students have unlimited access while others have none at all. This could lead to an educational disadvantage for those students with little or no access. Only 47.8 per cent of all students living in the suburb in which ELSSs and interviews were conducted have access to ICT at home (ABS, 2010b).

Australian studies on low socio-economic status and retention in education have been part of the longitudinal studies on Australian youth carried out on behalf of the Australian Council for Education Research (ACER) and the Commonwealth Department of Education and Training. Part of the research looked at the curriculum offered by schools and the socio-economic status of the family.

> One of the consistent findings in the research is that non-completion is related to social background. Non- completers are much more likely to come from lower SES backgrounds where the parents are more often in unskilled work, the parents have a limited amount of formal schooling, and the family has a low level of income (Lamb, Dwyer and Wyn, 2000, p. 7)

The Australian Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), in the National Report on Schooling estimated total year 12 completion in 2005 was 67 per cent of eligible students. In the same table of completion estimates in this report, completion rates of students in the low socio-economic group was 59 per cent while student from the high socio-economic group was 79 per cent (MCEETYA, 2005). In the same report, the figures for completion rates for Tasmania were 61 per cent for the metropolitan area, 46 per cent for provincial and 49 per cent for remote areas. The Tasmanian average was 52 per cent (MCEETYA, 2005, p. 38). The 20 per cent difference between the two groups might not be totally attributed to family background. There may be other causes and effects. Research would need to be completed on the influences of these other causes or whether the causes resulted from the low socio-economic status of the family.

Two members of the street kids' discussion group said they had left school because of a family split-up.

> Zac left school when he was just 15 years old. *"My parents got divorced when I was in year six and my father moved to the suburb next to my mother's house, about 4 kilometres away. I was supposed to spend alternating weeks with my father and mother. After a while I felt that neither parent really wanted me, therefore I was often expected to travel for about an hour and stay with my grandparents. My education fell behind and I was constantly in trouble because I would leave my books or part of my uniform at one of the three homes. I was always borrowing money from the school office as I never had lunch money or I had gone for long periods without any food."*

The second of the two street kids, Gretchen, was living with her father and his girlfriend when she was still at school. *"My parents had divorced when I was in first year high school. My father was a salesman and would often go away from home, leaving me by myself but with a few dollars to buy some fast food for my main meal. On one occasion my dad and his girlfriend went away for a horse race. Dad left me $5.00 saying he would be home late the same night or early the next day. My dad had won on the horses and decided he and his girlfriend would have a few nights away. They did not let me know and I used the $5.00 the first night and had nothing for the next three nights. I was always uncertain of dad's time away and his constant travelling this left me lonely and afraid. I began to hang out with the street kids and eventually left school and home to be with them all of the time."*

In the following chapters thick descriptions appear in relations between early school leavers and school, patterns of leaving, patterns of employment, and problems of becoming responsible, independent adults.

Chapter Six

Early School Leavers and School

From the diverse range of student responses in the surveys, I gathered themes related to school. The percentages of students responding to themes such as hating school, teachers do not like me and the subjects do not suit me, were easily identified. It was from the discussion groups and interviews that I gained a more individualised understanding of what affects young people in relation to their school experience.

In this chapter of analysis and interpretation, differently from that under the heading Family and yet in many ways deeply connected to it, I set the responses from early school leavers surveys, discussions and interviews alongside research and my commentary on it related to curriculum, learning experience, subject choice, conforming to school systems, attainment levels, teacher-student relationship and quality teaching. I present this analysis and interpretation in two parts. Section1 reveals a discussion and implications for intended curricula, implemented curricula and attained curricula. Section 2 reveals and discusses unattended curricula and unattained curricula.

Intended, implemented and attained curriculum

Robert Marzano (2003), when writing about what works in schools, listed them in five areas. Although the five were not ranked, the first of these looked at a guaranteed and viable curriculum. Marzano wrote that this factor was important if the student was to be offered an "opportunity to learn" (OTL) (p. 22). He went on to say that often the intended curriculum was different to that which the student attained.

> The intended curriculum is content specified by the state, district, or school to be addressed in a particular course or at a particular year level. The implemented curriculum is content actually delivered by the teacher, and the attained curriculum is content actually learned by students. The discrepancy between the intended curriculum and the implemented curriculum makes OTL a prominent factor in student achievement… (p. 23).

Marzano's research indicates that the difference between intended and implemented curriculum, even if the same text book is used, varies between teachers and what they may offer in their subject that is not in the standard text. He further states that any curriculum should be determined by the time given for the opportunity to learn (p. 24).

While Tasmanian schools must follow the state and national curriculum there is no reason each school could not offer school-based subjects as part of their curriculum if they felt there was a need or a gap in the learning opportunities of some of its students. It may even be possible to have some of these subjects registered and accredited as part of the state curriculum. The range of choices, an appropriate learning environment for the potential early leaver and the broad use of teaching and training resources are important for the retention of students. Lamb, Walstab, Teese, Vickers and Rumberger2004) report,

> The research literature on completing school and on differential achievement both suggest that curriculum has an important role to play in engaging young people in education, particularly through:
>
> • greater breadth of curriculum choice
>
> • a more appropriate instructional environment for the curriculum, and

> • better cooperation between school and other educational agencies to provide alternatives to young people (p. 48).

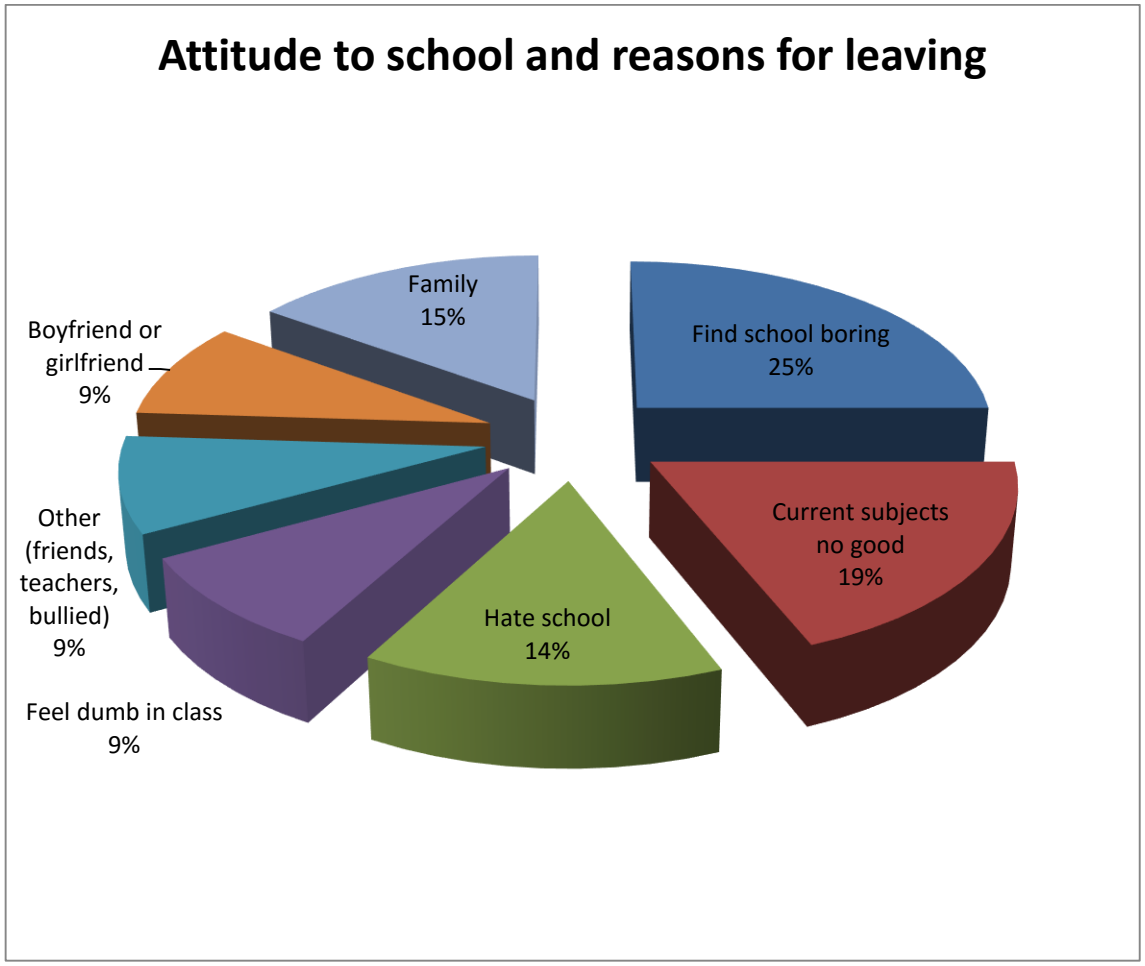
te Riele (2000) looked at second chance education at senior colleges and the returning to education opportunities for early school leavers. In her conference paper she wrote of the need for a broad curriculum which includes VET programs, full service programs for years 10, 11 and 12 and a higher profile of careers advisors, counsellors and learning difficulties support staff in senior schools (te Riele, 2000). Economic rationalisation suggests services are financially viable and best used when there is a concentration of resources relevant to older students on one site. te Riele was not advocating a wholesale change to senior colleges as the only option or the best option but instead, as an option for those who may be at risk of leaving or wishing to re-enter the education process. She was advocating a need for the broad range of services and subject information in order to assist these students and believed this was one means of doing so.

Here is where the work of Marzano, Lamb et al and te Riele helps give meaning to my analysis. Meaningful learning experiences are important for student retention. Subject choices, teaching skills and a multifaceted approach to learning are necessary if students are to engage in the education process and obtain satisfaction and relevance from the subjects they choose. While the structure of the curriculum satisfies both state and federal government requirements of certification, there are other subjects available for a diverse group to find some satisfaction in their selection choices. My thesis emphasises the need for schools to review the needs of the early school leavers in terms of the resources schools have, successful programs used elsewhere and ways to assist students

with both academic and non-academic pressures including social interaction, resilience and emotional development.

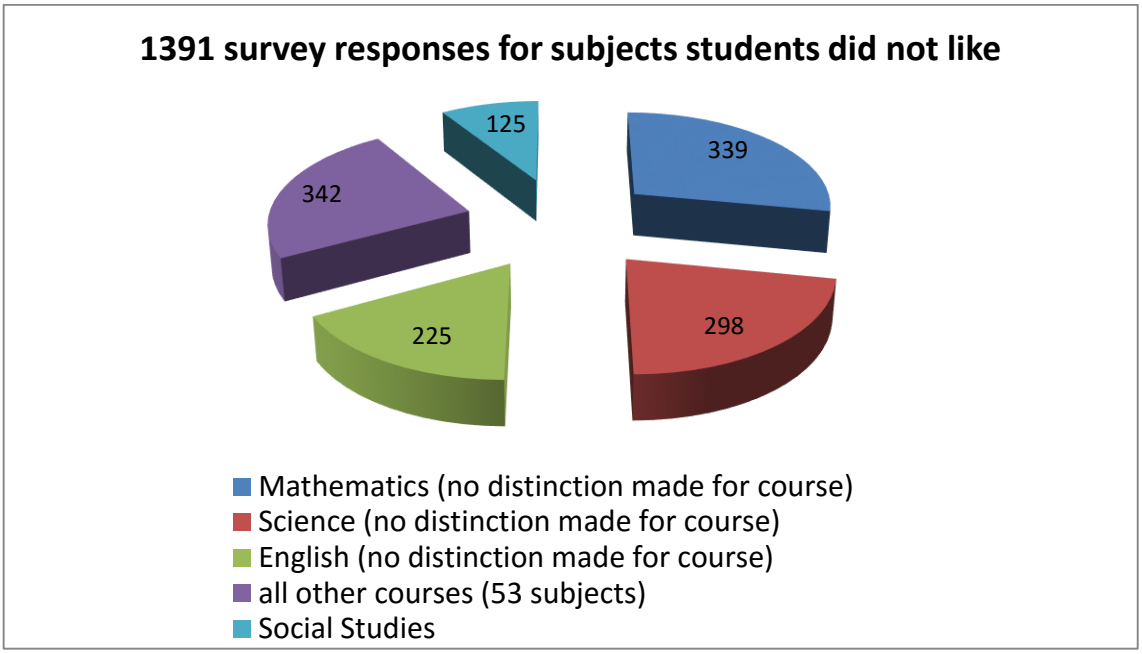
The information provided to students for making subject choices at each of the schools I visited in my research suburb varied between schools. Students' perceptions of the reasons behind the subject selection method varied. While some students reported confidence in their understanding of the need to select subjects carefully, others expressed low levels of confidence, some even saying that their teachers added a bias towards or against their personal selection. "*I wanted to study Economics but the teacher interviewing me knew I was good at Drama so he told me to change my subject choice form because it would help me get a part in the school musical he was in charge of" (Jenny).* Some students said they made choices based on what their friends were doing. "*I wanted to be in the same classes as my girlfriend so I just copied her subject choice form" (Ollie).* Among those interviewed, some said their level of confidence in making a correct choice linked directly to the method of dissemination of information operating within particular school sites. "*The college came to our high school and held a parent information session, they then came back and spoke to each of us before helping us with our final choices so I knew I had made good choices" (Fred).* I found over 19 per cent of students said their current subjects were not very good. Students in the ELSSs gave their reasons for school not being a good place for them, see Graph 6.

Graph 6 Reasons for leaving based on subjects and attitude to school



With regard to subjects that students said they did not like, a long list of disliked subjects emerged. In Graph 8, I highlight the main subjects the students reported they do not enjoy in class.

Graph 7 **Main subjects students did not enjoy**



What is important to my concern for early school leavers is that three subjects most disliked—English, Mathematics and Science—are compulsory subjects until the end of year 10. If I were to extrapolate from the data collected from 1200 year 9 to year 12 students out of 2506 year 7 to year 12 students in the suburb, I would find appropriate justification for being highly concerned as an educator. Some students did not respond to this part of the survey while others nominated more than one subject they did not like. This accounts for the 1391 responses from 1200 survey forms used. With this in mind approximately 25 per cent of the students did not like Mathematics or Science, and 17 per cent did not like English.

In order to retain students who state they find school boring or the subject offerings do not suit them, the school could undertake curriculum initiatives to include programs and activities that aim to develop (or change) knowledge, skills and attitudes of the potential early school leavers. There are initiatives that I propose might make up a

holistic approach to the development of students, concerning themselves with cognitive, emotional, personal physical and behavioural development of the individual. This is a broad approach that offers an extended view on the 'whole' young person. Schools could adopt this approach in order to develop specific strategies for each of the individual students at risk of becoming an early school leaver. That is, the school's strategy would be an effort to engage and maintain the involvement of these at risk students. Some of these curriculum changes will have a preventive effect to stop early leaving for all young people at a school, some can be made more specific to particular groups of young people; while other changes could take an integrated approach to curriculum development by taking health, welfare and/or well-being issues into the mainstream curriculum. *"My college began a program called Potential, each of the letters meant something but I can't remember what they are. At first I felt like a dumb kid being taken out of class, but I really came to enjoy it and looked forward to the days we had these classes" (Terry).*

We live in an era where there are rapid changes in society, technology and high unemployment, all of which particularly affect young people and their subject choices. We require different sectors in our society to co-operate in developing new ways of identifying and catering for the varied needs of young people as individuals. There have been successful initiatives undertaken which developed more flexible approaches and greater diversity in pathways, breaking down the demarcation between work, training and education. *"We were not supposed to use phones at school but my history teacher showed us how to use our mobile phones as a text book or an encyclopaedia" (Henry).*

An Australian Curriculum in the 21st century needs to acknowledge the changing ways in which young people will learn and the challenges that will continue to shape their learning in the future. The curriculum is important in setting out what will be taught, what students need to learn and the expected quality of that learning (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2012, p. 7).

Unintended and unattained curriculum

What is it in the learning/teaching program that excites, stimulates and engages those who do not fall into the category of early school leavers? As Karen Evans, Christan Gerlach and Sandrine Kelner, S., (2007) report, it is better that the theory of adolescent development links to questions of learning in adolescence through an integrative theoretical perspective that recognises,

> Learning is natural for human beings. Learning is much more than content acquisition or the development of cognitive skills. Learning may be defined as the means of expansion of a person's capacities. Learning always involves the interaction of cognitive and emotional thoughts, and learning always occurs in social contexts through interaction between learners and their environments. (Evans, Gerlach, & Kelner, 2007, p. 197)

Each student is quite different from the next one and a solution for one may not be the answer for another. The introduction of Vocational Education and Training (VET) courses in Australia and school-based apprenticeships has gone a long way to cater for the needs of some of those for whom the general curriculum does not 'fit', however, there is still a percentage of students who do not 'fit' the general curriculum nor are suited or agreeable with VET style courses. "Students will quickly become disengaged if

classroom teaching does not connect with their lives, and if it does not engage them as learners with topics and issues that have interest and meaning for them" (van Kraayenoord, 2002, p. 398).

The British Workhouse was the model for early colonial public schools. This was a system of strict regimentation for both student and teacher, physical punishment was the accepted form of class control and all students had to conform to a set uniformity and a hierarchical structure (Youth Affairs Network Queensland, 2003). Much of this system is inherent in schools today. In today's society, such a culture of conforming and being compliant is not possible for some students. When faced with an authoritarian regime in the school young people find it difficult to cope and are therefore at risk of becoming an early school leaver, as you will see from the stories of young people provided by my research and my own lived experience. *"One of my teachers always yelled at us, he would pick on us if we had the wrong socks on or a ring in our ear. He never seemed to worry about our work only if we looked right and had manners. I just wanted to avoid him, and his subjects" (Maree).*

Here I am not attributing all problems in relation to early school leavers to the school structure. From my analysis of the surveys and interviews, I do attend to aspects of school and attendance at school.

> Student performance can be affected by factors that may be partly or totally outside the influence of the school system, such as student commitment, family environment (including socioeconomic status, parents' educational attainment and support for the child) and the proximity of the school to other educational facilities (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (Australia), 2012, p. 4).

In relation to school problems, a discussion paper by the Youth Affairs network in Queensland (2003) found that young people might see schools as boring, irrelevant and even prison-like. Young people may respond negatively when forced into uniforms, made to follow the same curriculum as everyone else and be punished if they do not comply. A situation where force is used to control young people, which may be similar to the situation at home.

A large proportion of the students I interviewed indicate that problems with school began at an early age and this set a trend for the remaining years. Kelly, now aged 16, said that in year 3 primary she changed schools. "*Being of a larger size many of the older girls picked a fight to see how tough I was. Not wishing to back down I began to instigate the fights until I had a reputation. This reputation stayed with me even upon transition to a nearby secondary school. My younger sister was bullied by others to see if she was tough like me. My defence of my sister resulted in suspension and eventual exclusion from school prior to the end of year 9 high school. I found fighting had become a habit and my reputation established so early were too difficult to remove and eventually I was kicked out of my home and at 15 years of age I am living day-to-day."*

Kelly's story of her forced aggression and subsequent alienation from school and family is not the only one from the group of street kids. Most were able to give examples of how early in life they had become uninterested and disengaged from education. Even the group of students still at school but thinking about dropping out could identify particular situations back in the early years which led to some of their problems. Please do not misunderstand this evidence, I am not saying the problems with retention belongs

in primary school. I am saying that a number of factors which occur in a young person's life gradually compound until they result in a need to get away from school. *"I hated school ever since year 3, I began to pretend I was sick so I could have days away from school. Mum would get angry with me but dad just let me get away with it. In year 8 I found I could wag classes by hiding in different rooms at school. I was caught when my cigarette set fire to the cleaner's cupboard so I was kicked out of school (Peta, aged 15).*

The need to get away from school can be first exhibited in constant or repetitive absenteeism (truancy). From ELSS results, 19 per cent of the students considered they missed a lot of classes due to absenteeism. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (1997) students with parents in non-professional jobs tended towards truancy more than any other. Secondly, if the student came from a single-parent family, their rate of truancy would be higher than any other group.

> The absence of either parent is also strongly related to truancy, and in this case, it is the absence of the mother that seems to make the most difference. Thus, almost half (48%) of respondents not living with their mother report playing truant in Year 11, compared to 31% of those who do live with their mother (OECD, 1997, p. 55).

The OECD (1997) also looked at the correlation between early truancy and disengagement from schooling in their report. "As for disengagement, and specifically disengagement caused by disaffection with schools or learning, after an examination of available national data sets, it was concluded that the truancy variable in the Youth Cohort Study (YCS) represented the best available indicator of disengagement" (p. 11).

Not all truancy necessarily reflects disengagement nor is it the only reflection of disengagement. Day dreaming, for example, can also be considered disengagement as

students allow their minds to wander away from the task at hand. Steven McIntosh and Nicholas Houghton (2005) classify disengaged students into three groups.

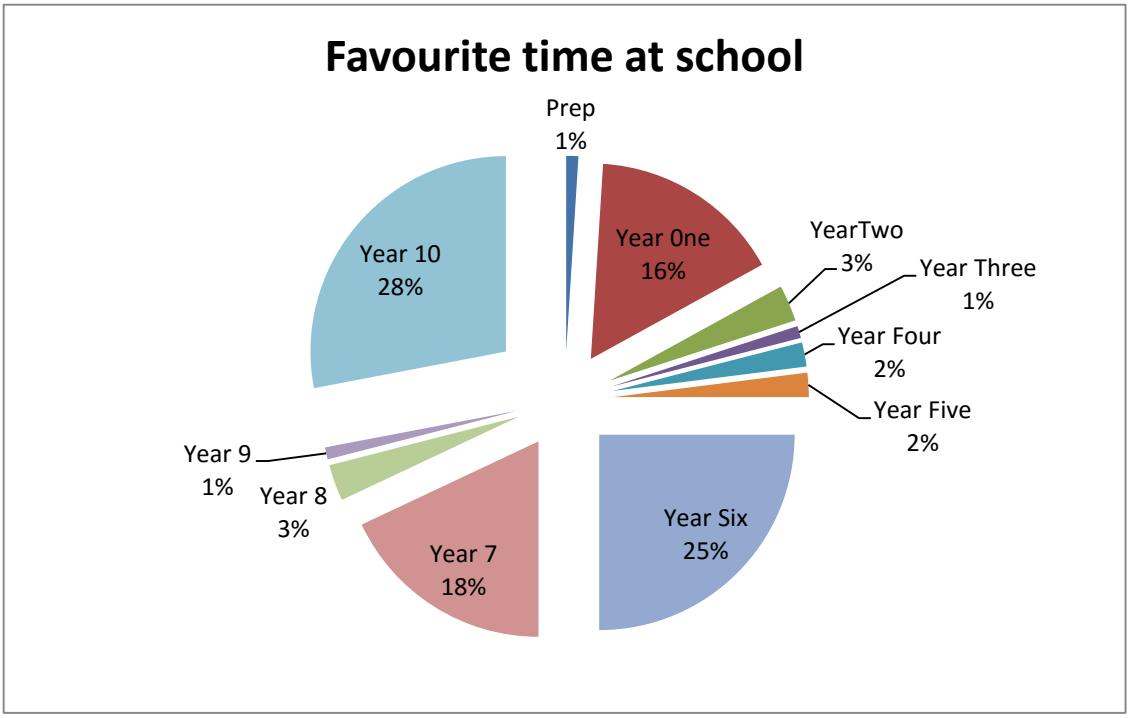
> The out of touch group, which is made up of those young people who have dropped out of all contact with the education system; the disaffected group are those who attend school on an irregular basis; and the final group are the students who remain until the end of year 12 but who know they will not receive any formal certification or the prescribed number of subject or competencies for transition to further education. (McIntosh & Houghton, 2005, p. 15)

From my data analysis, 18.7 per cent of the students surveyed hate school. In discussion, students gave reasons for hating school. Amongst their reasons were "teachers hated me", "my subjects were boring", "I am bullied", and many more such reasons that all culminated in nearly 20 per cent of the students hating school. Dissatisfaction to the point of hatred might well suggest a justifiable reason for students not wanting to remain at school.

> When children feel they belong and find their realities reflected in the curriculum and conversations of schooling, research has demonstrated repeatedly that they are more engaged in learning and that they experience greater school success… Unless all children experience a sense of belonging in our schools, they are being educated in institutions that exclude and marginalize them, that perpetuate inequity and inequality rather than democracy and social justice. (Shields, 2004, p. 122)

When asked to nominate their favourite time at school 16 per cent of the students nominated year 1 primary, 25 per cent nominated year 6, 18 per cent nominated year 7 and 28 per cent nominated year 10. In Tasmania, because of the education system, these years are either at the beginning of a new school or the end of the school. The times at school nominated as the worst were Preparation for primary school, year 3 and year 5 primaries and year 9 secondary.

Graph 8 **Favourite times at school**



When asked why the favourite class choices were made the general response from students was that year one was the start, and so was year seven, and you felt good when new things were being presented. In year six and year ten you were at the top and you were treated differently. There were many more reasons for explaining the worst years, Prep was more school-like but kindergarten was fun, by year three the teachers either

liked you or did not, and in year five and year nine you were not allowed as much freedom as those in the leaving classes of year six and year ten. "*In year 9, other students were much more likely to pick on you or bully you especially if you did not grow as quickly as them. By that year, teachers had also decided if you were smart or dumb and did not care if you tried in class" (Geoff, year 10).*

For those students who hate school one alternative is to try on-line education. On-line education may assist students in isolated areas or students who do not cope with mainstream education. The use of ICT implies students have strong literacy and computer skills and they have access to the internet and on-line support. An alternative for isolated students is to stay at a hostel during term time. Tasmania has established regional accommodation facilities for students from isolated areas. In Hobart, there are two such government facilities, one for boys and one for girls. Once again, not all students can handle the responsibility of self-discipline nor do they have the ability to cope with living away from family and friends.

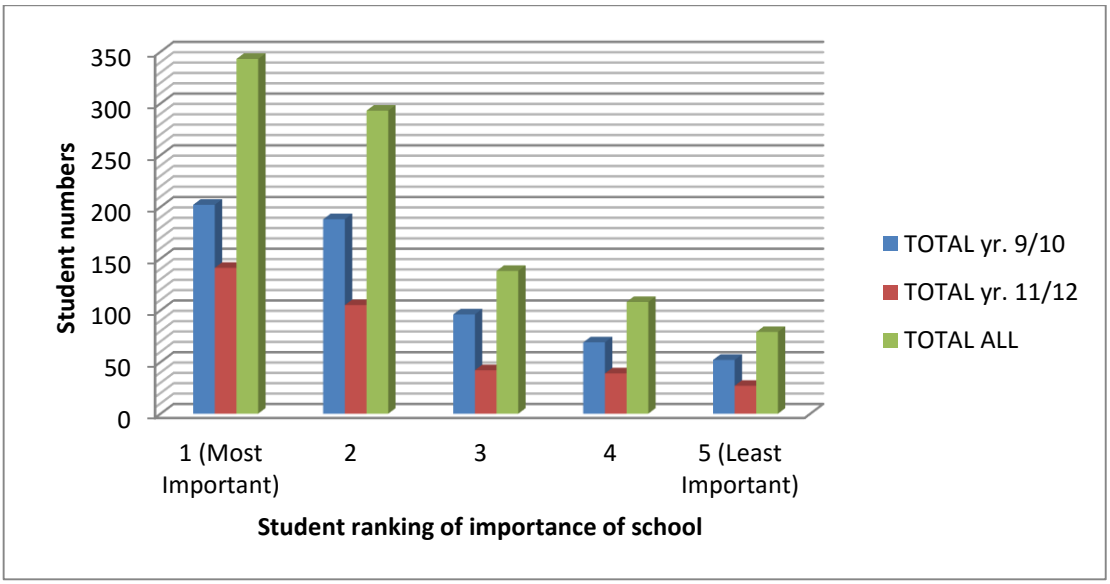
Educational attainment is important in society today. From my ELSS over 19 per cent of students thought that education was the least important thing in their lives. Many commented that they already knew enough or would learn on the job. They could not see a link between education and a use for it in future years. Peter, one of the boys in the discussion groups, told how his big brother got a job without year 12 and his father began working at 15 years of age. I tried to discuss with Peter the change in employment expectations since that time, he could not be dissuaded from believing there was a place for him in the employment market. Sarah said how she had to learn maths and

computers but the job she wanted did not require maths because they had a cash register that did the calculations for you.

The Australian Productivity Commission holds quite different views.

> The level of educational attainment can impact positively on the employment status of the individual. In 2010 there were 6.7 million employed people who had a non-school qualification, representing 82.8 per cent of people with a non-school qualification aged 15–64 years. People whose highest non-school qualification was a bachelor degree or higher were most likely to be employed (85.0 per cent), while people who did not complete secondary school were the least likely to be employed (57.2 per cent). (Australian Productivity Commission, 2012, p. 14)

Graph 9 Student's perception of the importance of education



When the discussion group members were asked to nominate what they valued most in their lives apart from material possessions most nominated strong relationships. Families and friendship were also important and many enjoyed the sense of feeling

needed by a group of peers or a particular person. They enjoyed a feeling of independence, especially if they had a good part-time position that provided money and responsibility. While statistics were not taken in the discussion groups for their choices, the list of things they valued the most included things such as family, friendships, physical health, independence, getting a job, many values held in common with those of the 2010 Mission Australia National survey of young people (Mission Australia, 2010, p. 9).

Students analysing teachers

The ELSSs conducted asked students to suggest both positive characteristics and negative characteristics of their teachers. Admittedly, some of the students saw "letting us muck about" as a positive but this was very few. Among the more positive characteristics were such things as ability to teach (7.4 per cent) and a willingness to help (7.2 per cent). When the total list of positive characteristics was examined they indicated a tendency towards two or three main skills, being able to relate and maintain a strong positive relationship between student and teacher; being able to provide a class that informs the student in a friendly, fun and explanatory manner, and finally; being able to establish a classroom environment where students feel safe and encouraged, one where all talents are inspired and challenged, and one where students want to learn.

The negative characteristics also suggested a few expected comments, such as "too strict". The majority of characteristics centred on the character of the teacher and their teaching methods. Approximately 16 per cent found their teachers yelled, got angry, were in a bad mood, always negative and could not control the class. A further 16

per cent found their teachers could not teach, 0.4 per cent (approximately four students) believed their teacher hated kids. Helen Stokes and the Victorian Department of Education (2000) says that research based on the views of young people continues to depict a school culture where negative teacher-student relationships are propped up by a system which disallows young people from expressing themselves or being heard from in true dialogue. Stokes et al go on to state that the results of their interviews indicate and abhorrence of education. "Overwhelmingly the young people interviewed had negative experiences of schooling and did not want to return to education in any form of school setting" (Stokes & Victorian Dept. of Education Employment and Training., 2000, p. 11).

The negative characteristics, as listed in the ELSS results, indicate a lack of any positive link with any significant school-based personnel and any relationships established were very much antagonistic or a passive one of mutual disinterest, which led to eventual disconnection. From my initial ELSS, 34 per cent of students thought they might leave before the end of year 12.

Table 3 Students from ELSS One thinking of leaving early

Do you think you might leave school before the end of year 12?	**TOTAL yr. 9/10**	**TOTAL yr. 11/12**	**TOTAL ALL**	**%**
Yes	266	95	361	34%
No	440	275	715	66%

These figures are very much in line with those produced by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2010c) which stated that apparent retention rates for all students from year 9 to year 12 in Tasmania at August 2009 were 64 per cent (ABS, 2010c), meaning that 36 per cent were early school leavers that year.

The ELSS responses from those who said they might leave also showed that among the reasons were, “school is boring (25 per cent), “the teachers do not like me” (4 per cent) and “I always feel dumb in class” (8 per cent).

The interviews gave a better picture and understanding of how these students saw teachers. A few could retell some positive episodes from their primary school but most told of being controlled by teachers through fear and intimidation, especially at the end of primary and start of secondary school. While they stated that the threats from teachers continued they were no longer concerned about their school results. Stephen, one of the street kids, said that he deliberately tried to “stuff up” in woodwork because it would make the teacher “lose it” and the rest of the class thought it was great how Stephen could control the teacher. Another, Kerry, said as the teacher yelled he yelled louder in response until the teacher made certain Kerry was refused entry to the class. Personally, I have also been guilty of making this basic mistake. In my first years of teaching I raised my voice to a student and he then raised his. I responded by raising mine further. He then broke into tears and said “Why does everyone yell at me?” I quickly realised I had become like the teachers I had disliked. Since then I have not raised my voice in anger with a student. Among the negative characteristics of teachers given by students in the original ELSS approximately 5 per cent “yelled”, 4 per cent were “in a bad mood”, 4 per cent “were angry” and 5 per cent “did not listen.”

The discussion groups found it difficult to name a person they could trust at school. They believed that any shared confidences would be discussed with other teachers and in the staffroom. Some teachers would use this information “as a weapon” to try to control a particular student or to “put them down “. Many students spoke of their

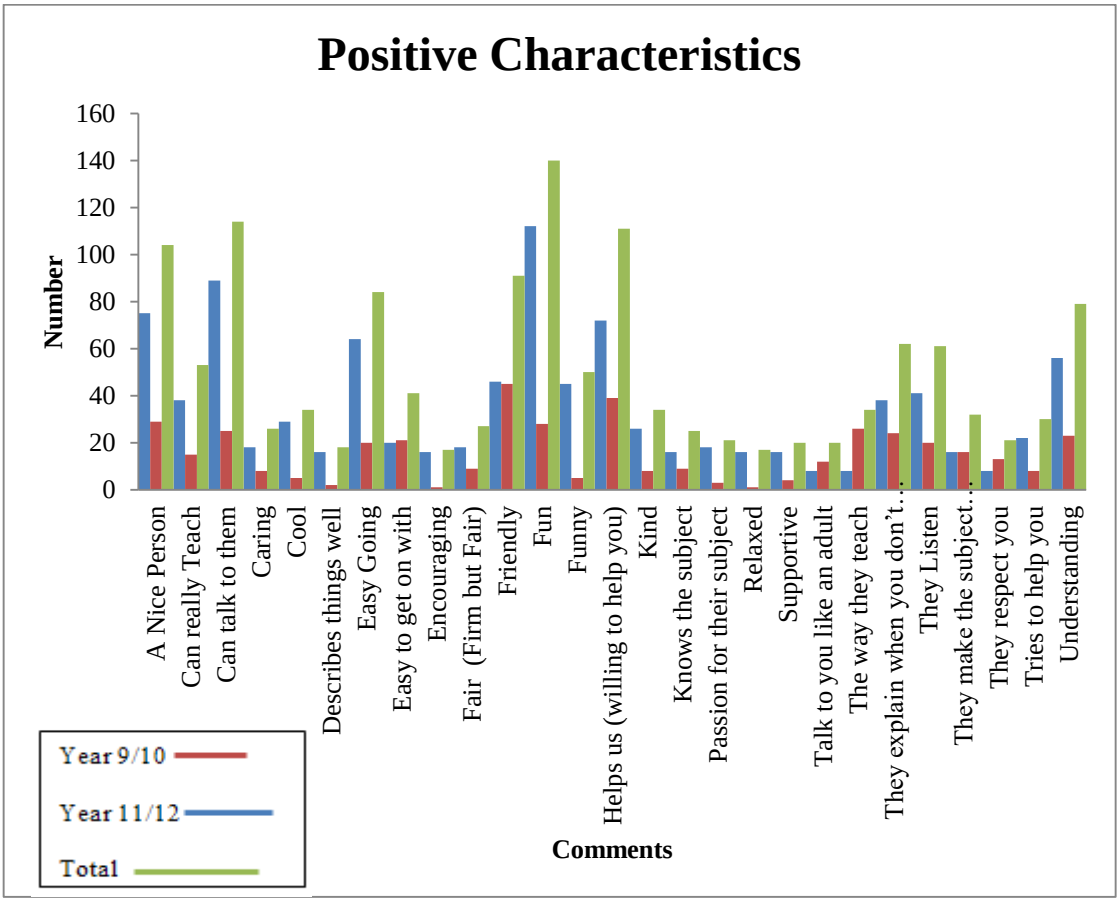
reputation preceding them or being targeted because an older sibling had caused trouble and they were categorised as having the same problems or being a trouble maker. Even though they were told they would get a fresh start each year, different teachers often raised previous events. For instance, Anna said, "I *left school in year 9. When I got into trouble during primary school and later the teachers told me at the start of each school year I had a fresh start and what happened in other years would not affect their treatment of me. As the year progressed the same teachers had raised things I had done in previous years and blamed me for everything that went wrong. In secondary school I decided I would "stuff about" because I was going to be blamed anyway*."

One of the major influential factors indicated by the ELSS and the individual interviews was the perceived quality of teaching practice. Far too often the accepted assumption behind the problems associated with young people is that teachers are incorrectly trained or of a poor quality. Walk into any school and you will find passionate, creative teachers. "Those that can, do, and those that can't, teach" might be a myth though it is constantly thrown up whenever there is a discussion about teacher quality. "..., there is no question that in functioning school systems such as those in most of Australia, the quality of teaching is the most decisive factor in what students achieve in school" (Gore & Ladwig, 2005, p. 113).

The work by Jenny Gore and James Ladwig (2005) and comments presented by students in the consultation thesis in which their report is printed (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2005), is well supported by comments from the students I surveyed and those in my discussion groups. Graph 11 indicates a sample of 1500

positive comments about teachers by those who completed the original ELSS in the suburban area of my research.

Graph 10 Positive teacher characteristics from ELSS One



Within the discussion groups there were a number of negative comments about teachers. When asked for a positive comment about at least one teacher who had been a good influence on their lives, these early school leavers made comments such as *"…he did not make you feel stupid and explained things in a different way so you could understand" (Janet). "…she was kind and had lots of patience with the class even though we were in the bottom class" (Trevor).*

From the ELSS 19 per cent of student responses said they hated school and this would be a reason for leaving. When asked for a reason for hating school 78 per cent of those interviewed said it was because of the teacher. When pressed for further information 81 per cent said it was because the teacher was the one who has or had the ultimate "responsibility for getting me into trouble" or "reporting me to the deputy."

Out of the ELSS, fifty-six positive characteristics and sixty-one negative characteristics of teachers noted by the students come to the fore. I acknowledge that a parent or school administrator would consider some of the positive characteristics as negative, and the same people would consider some of the negative characteristics as positive. The characteristic "makes you work", for example, listed as a negative by 2 per cent of the students or the "cool, is easy going" positive characteristic nominated by 2 per cent of students, might be seen oppositely by their teachers. Teachers might attribute their biases and prejudices differently and interpret such meanings different.

The percentages listed for each of the positive and negative characteristics appear small. The reason for this may be that I did not present a list and ask the students to select. I did allow them the opportunity to make their own comments. I also tried not to amalgamate too many responses unless their wording was very similar. For example, there were a number of ways students described teachers as a nice person. Some said they were nice, others said he was a good person, really kind and always said hello and smiled.

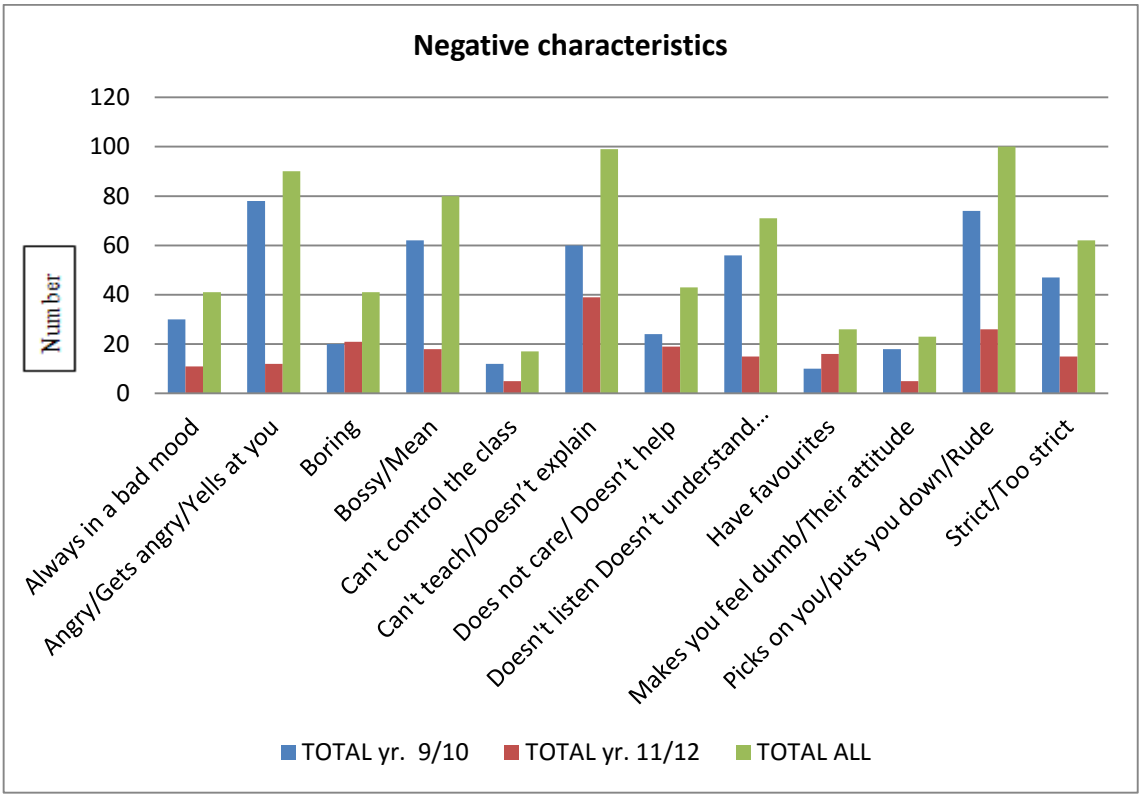
When you take a close look at the positive characteristics named by the students generally, they discern a 'good' teacher from a 'bad' teacher. "Can really teach" was named by 3 per cent of students, which equates to fifty-three students. Other positive

characteristics included: “teachers make the subject interesting,” “explain when you don't understand,” “are understanding in their way,” “try to help,” “have a passion for their subject,” “are supportive and are willing to help us.” The remainder of the positive comments continues in this vein and is a confirming response to those who say we need to work on quality teaching.

As the negative characteristics named seem to be the basis for some students leaving school early, it was these characteristics that formed the background for my discussions with the interview groups. Some of the high-scoring negative characteristics include “the teachers can't teach” (3 per cent) and “the teacher is too strict” (4 per cent). A further 4 per cent said “the teacher does not explain.”

The students surveyed noticed the lack of teacher interaction and interest in what they were doing. Some of the negative characteristics I list indicate this. An example of this is the number of students who wrote small responses in the survey in the spaces left for comment. These responses said things such as “my teacher does not mark our work, she just tells us to read books while she reads the newspaper,” “he does not explain anything, if you ask him he tells you to work it out for yourself,” and “he looks after the students who can do maths but does not help those who cannot.”

Graph 11 Some of the negative characteristics of teachers



When I asked about this in the staffroom, a colleague at the time replied *"... my job is to teach maths not to get to know the kids. I do not want to be their friend or hear their problems."* I remember an occasion concerning this colleague. At the end of each year, we said farewell to the students as they left. I noticed he was standing next to another teacher who went out of her way to try to know every child's name. After the children had gone he questioned his female colleague about why she went to so much trouble. This person is no longer a teacher, and could be one of the seven or eight people that students nominated in the ELSS, as "they don't want to teach" (0.5 per cent of 1500 responses).

Over 34 per cent of participants in the ELSS said either they could not list any negative characteristics for their teachers or did not respond. An alarming feature of the ELSS results was the total number of 'mood' responses when you added up the characteristics relating to teachers' mood or response to students. These include, "always in a bad mood," "gets angry," "yells," "puts you down" and "rude."

The overall total for these 'mood' characteristics is over 18 per cent. This does not appear to be a significant percentage. I have already mentioned why the statistics may appear small. The number of students who responded with these negative characteristics was 183 from approximately 1500 responses.

The interview groups could say that there were teachers in their school life who could keep open some communication with them. These students, all former students, stated that when this teacher moved, or the student changed school, they lost that contact and therefore, found it difficult to say anything positive to do with school. *"I knew one teacher-librarian in primary school who always made us feel welcome in the library and tried to help us all the time. After I left primary, I would go back there on student-free days and help the librarian cover books and stack the shelves. I lost contact with her because she moved away. This was difficult for me because I did not have anyone to talk to" (Jo).*

Among the negative characteristics were such things as "picks on you" (2.7 per cent), "doesn't listen to you" (4.7per cent), "doesn't care" (3.4 per cent) and "doesn't understand you" (1.6 per cent). In the discussions with the groups these were thought of as teachers' ways of coping with repetitive behavioural problems in classes that sometimes had large numbers.

Classroom management needs to be one of the key features of teacher training. While there are many guides to classroom management, which suggest such things as discipline, teacher organisation, class organisation and subject matter, there are also those that mention relationship. *"My English teacher would take us to the school library every lesson. He would give us some worksheets, and then he would sit down and read all the newspapers. One day, we decided to trick him, so we put different names on the worksheets. When he went to give them back, he did not know who to give them to as he did not know our name. He would leave the sheets on the table and tell us to collect our own. We even took it in turns wagging classes as he did not know who called out when he was doing the roll call" (Michael).* As the discussion groups were gaining trust in me, Michael continued his story. *"We made up a fake student, when roll call was taken we would say "here" for this fake student. Sometimes we answered a worksheet in his name. At the end of term I got into trouble because the teacher wrote a report for the fake student and then the principal found out."*

The discussion groups were all able to discern a good teacher who cared from one who did not care or who was unable to handle disruptive behaviour. They were also able to say that many students would try to "bait" teachers, especially relief teachers or new teachers. In some cases, they said it was a competition between groups to see how many could make teachers cry. Jenny, one of the year 12 students in the discussion group, said she had changed schools in year 9 because her peers were constantly trying to annoy the teacher and get him "to lose his cool." *"My marks began to suffer as I wasn't learning anything. My parents moved to another suburb, and I changed schools. After changing schools, it took some time for me to catch up. When I went to college for year 11 most of*

the kids from my year 9 school did not go on or just drifted through the classes" (Jenny). Jenny was not the only one to comment on being able to 'challenge' the teacher in order to get a response. Gary told of one 'trick' the class did to upset the teacher. *"One student would ask to use the bathroom, after a few minutes another would ask, and so on. This would continue, with the students excused staying out of class, until we could get as many of our classmates out of the room before the teacher got upset or angry."*

The "no negative characteristics" comment was made up of ELSS responses who could not state any negative characteristics together with those who did not respond to this section of the ELSS. Their reasons for 'no response' was unable to be obtained as the ELSS was anonymous, however, the discussion groups said some students may have felt too scared to write anything just in case the home room teacher or other teachers read their responses and recognise their handwriting. Of the 533 "no negative characteristics" a total of 227 students had left this section blank while the rest had made some written comment about the fact that they could not name a negative characteristic or the teacher did not have any. The comments were very brief and included comments such as, "all my teachers are ok," "teachers have a hard job," "my teachers are nice" and "my teachers try to help us all the time."

The teacher-student relationship comes in many forms, but it is obvious that a positive relationship between student and teacher must be deemed important for student achievement and motivation. Good relationships could be seen to prevent early school leaving. John Vitto (2003) implies that teachers must be responsible in creating good relationships with students.

> The goal of the relationship-driven classroom is not only to prevent student misbehavior in the short term but also to help students learn the skills that prevent the development of more serious personal and socially destructive behaviors. To prevent destructive behaviors such as violence, substance abuse, mental disorders, early pregnancy, and school dropout, we must strive to prevent the development of known precursors to them. (Vitto, 2003, p. 5)

Positive relationships are important. During the time I spent with various discussion groups, and in particular the young people who saw themselves as street kids, the number of anecdotes about students being labelled by teachers were quite predominant. Mary's story, gives further insight into the lack of opportunity and the affect labelling can have on students. *"My teacher asked why I was in his class because he said I wasn't smart enough to pass. I did all of my work and I thought I did well on tests but he always failed me. Even when I compared my answers with other students he refused to give me a better mark."*

Vitto suggests perhaps that teachers' labels link to their expectations. "Teachers set high expectations when they see something in students that the students may or may not see in themselves; they set low expectations when we see only labels, deficits, and past test scores" (p. 12).

Just as not all students learn the same way not all students respond the same way to correction, instruction or questions. Dialogue, as discussed by Bohm and Freire, is a practice available for teachers to develop with students from the very early years of schooling. Freire (2005) trusts that,

> They (educators) know that dialogue centred not only on the content to be taught but on life itself, if it is true, not only is valid from the point of view of the act of teaching but also prepares an open and free climate in the ambience of their classroom (p. 115).

Likewise, in secondary schools dialogical practice is available for teachers to hone. Students need to be part of their own learning—they learn how close to adulthood they are and they learn that the privileges of adulthood are fast becoming theirs. According to Bohm (2004), skilful dialogue teaches both teachers and students that

> Normally we don't see that our assumptions are affecting the nature of our observations...When we observe we forget that, and we are looking without taking that into account. But this "observer" profoundly affects what it is observing, and it is also affected by what it is observing – there is very little separation between them (pp. 79-80).

When teachers and students learn to be observers in this way, relationships of trust, respect and shared understanding become possible. In my thesis, I continue to advocate skilful dialogue in classrooms.

Compounding constraints

Because of the influence teachers have on students, and the negative or positive comments made about teachers by those responding to the survey, I began to look at the role a good teacher would have in decreasing the rate of students leaving school early.

Here I start with the process of recruitment and ongoing professional development of teachers.

Evidence shows that quality teaching can overcome location and other disadvantages and is the single greatest in-school influence on student engagement and achievement. Improving teacher quality requires both strong school leadership and new approaches to teacher recruitment, retention and reward (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2012, p. 1).

In November 2007, the Labor Government of Australia, led by then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, called for an education revolution. One of the core areas of this policy approach to education was to improve the quality of teaching and thereby affect the retention rate of school leavers. The response to insure quality teaching was to introduce business style models of performance management and merit pay for those considered quality teachers. It was suggested that teachers would be paid on performance rather than length of service or qualifications. "Recently at the national level, it has been suggested that performance-based pay should be introduced to attract and retain excellent teachers to the profession and to raise the esteem of the profession" (Working Group, 2006, p. 7).

Few critics of the current quality of teaching take into account the heterogeneous nature of a group of students and the range of goals, values and ability. Nor do they take into account supply and demand of quality teachers if such a system were introduced. Schools in recognised disadvantaged communities would struggle to recruit and keep highly paid staff without affecting class size and other budget areas. Leesa Wheelahan Gavin Moodie and Emma Curtin (2010) presented a four part options review on what

constitutes a quality teacher and how "assessment" could be conducted for attainment of that title.

> We noted that peer assessment is the most direct evaluation of teaching quality, but we noted the variability and cost of peer assessments. The other measures are successively more removed from teaching and the activity being evaluated, which makes it successively more difficult to isolate the effect of teaching from the several other factors that affect student attainment, graduate outcomes and graduates' performance (p. 6).

High quality education comes at a high cost, budgetary constraints and the demand for extra expenditure in the major services are always causing a conflict of choice. Any economy only has a limited amount to spend and their income is limited by levels of tax burden and borrowing. With the limited income do they spend it on infrastructure, health, education or any one of the myriad choices? After this decision is made the educational authorities have to make a decision on where to spend the budget and which schools should receive a larger share or smaller share. Then each school, if it has control of the budget, must decide how to allocate their share. "Expenditure per student by educational institutions is largely influenced by teachers' salaries, pension systems, instructional and teaching hours, the cost of teaching materials, the facilities, the curriculum being offered and the number of students enrolled in the system" (Secretary General of OECD, 2011, p. 207).

Because teachers' salaries are a large proportion of educational costs, any extra allocated to quality teachers would have to be carefully audited. If the allocation to the quality teachers is based on student outcomes then it begs the question, "Why would a

teacher wish to work in a poorly performing school where the students may not be concerned about staying until the end of year 12?" A quality teacher on performance-based pay is not going to remain or even enter such a school, especially if he or she thought this may affect their level of salary. "High staff turnover in such schools means that the benefits of professional development and capacity building, particularly delivered through new and innovative programs designed for disadvantaged students, do not stay with the school" (p. 150).

The supply and demand for teachers relies on a number of factors. These factors include the birth-rate and ages of young students as they progress through the various stages of compulsory education. They also include the number of teachers who are at retirement age, the number of teachers who quit after very few years of teaching and the financial considerations together with the status afforded to those who take up this vocation. One factor is teacher-student ratio. The combination of pay, status and the number of students in a class will determine how many teachers desire to stay teaching and their level of satisfaction.

> So how much teachers are paid can influence quality and has an important bearing on costs. It can affect whether nations recruit the most able graduates into the teaching profession, as well as their capacity to adjust overall public spending to the realities of fiscal constraints. (OECD, 1997, p. 56)

Like any other professional body, teachers must continually attend to their own professional development. Research indicates that Tasmanian teachers have to undergo many changes to their practices that are then rejected or changed, often based on political agendas (Gardner & Williamson, 2000). Schools and educational systems are constantly

being changed, sometimes on the whim of a politician or a new government. This may make Tasmanian teachers very reluctant to adopt change or accept change as indicated by Christine Gardener and John Williamson (2000) and Barry Prismal (2014).

> During the last two decades marked changes have occurred in levels of public acceptance of schooling and schooling outcomes. The twin pressures for educational change, and political involvement in influencing change, have flourished (Gardner & Williamson, 2000, p. 2).

As Prismal (2014) writes in his newspaper article, "Politicians can't help themselves when they tinker and tamper with our education system. Since 2000, there have been six major changes from both federal and state education ministers. More than half have failed, or failed to survive a change of minister" (Prismal, 2014).

Neither governments nor policies are able to mandate what matters because as Michael Fullan (1994) says "... what matters most are local motivation, skills, know-how, and commitment" (Fullan, 1994, p. 187). Peter Bridgeman and Glyn Davis (2000) expanded on this point when they wrote about policies and their implementation.

> Policies must allow some discretion to those who implement and operate the program...policies fail because people do not respond to the program in ways government expects. If those implementing policy cannot identify the rationale and benefits of policy, its ability to be successfully realised will be reduced. (pp. 120-121)

There are many factors teachers identify as barriers to their own effective professional development. Julie Lester (2003) wrote in the American Secondary

Education Journal about her studies in the United States of America. Her studies showed that the most effective teachers are those committed to ongoing professional development. The study also showed that barriers of time and ineffective instruction proved a problem with effective professional development.

> Respondents offered the following "real life" examples of extra responsibilities that interrupt daily schedules and activities: (a) requests for additional documentation, (b) unanticipated responsibilities with extracurricular activities, (c) expectations that teachers rise to the demands of high stakes testing, and (d) disruptions to regular schedules that result in a need to attend to students' needs. (p. 55)

If each of the states and territories of Australia are considered, there are a variety of structures and expectations within educational systems. Teaching standards and teacher training differs in each of the states. At present, the general curriculum differs between states as do pay and hours of work. In 2013, some subjects, such as Mathematics and Science, were trialled as part of a roll-out of the new National Curriculum structure. Expansion will occur in the next few years of the National Curriculum to include comparable year 11 and year 12 subjects in all states and territories. Teachers, at present, do not have an overall federal registration system based on the same expectations, although this is expected to change with the implementation of the National Curriculum. Therefore, professional development, teaching materials and pedagogy cannot be as professionally developed nor as widely distributed as would be desired. It would be akin to the chartered accountants of Tasmania having different

standards to those in Victoria. Fortunately, for investors and companies, in both states they operate under the Australian Accounting Standards.

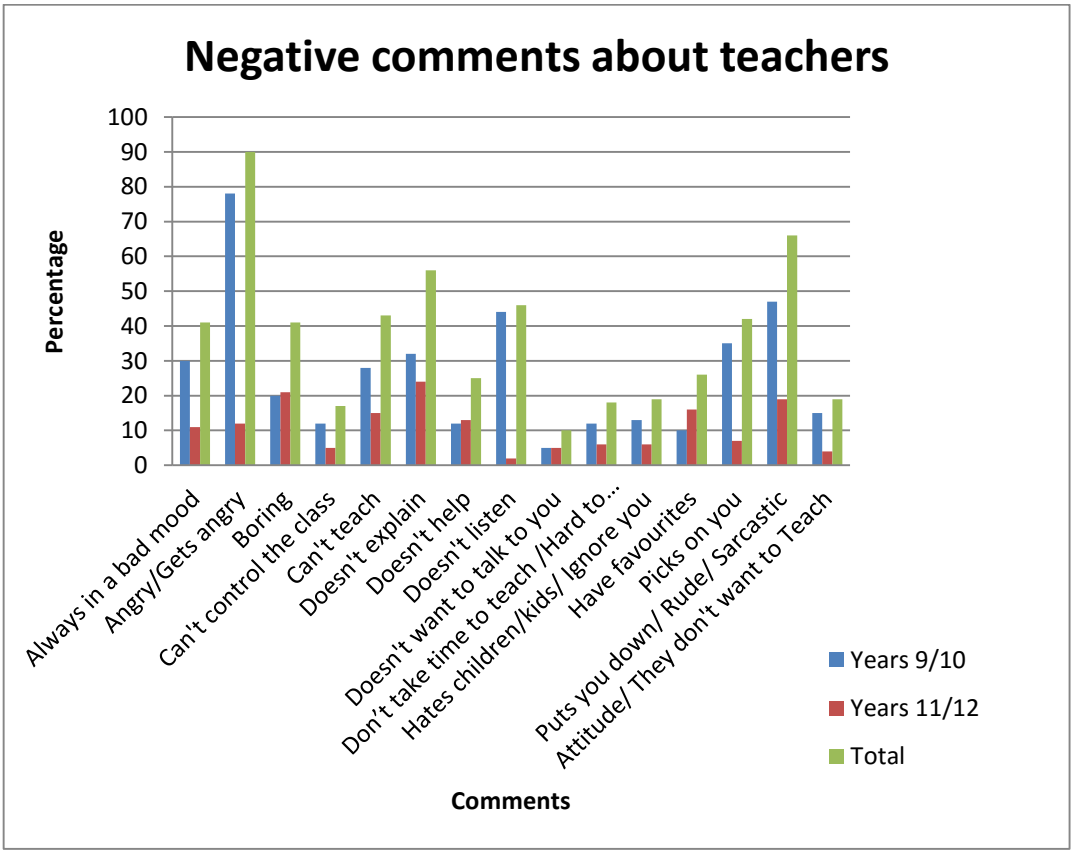
A standardised curriculum will prevent some of the current problems of schools providing some of the state-certified curriculum and some of their own in-school curricula. As Lawrence Angus (2006) explains the debate over quality teaching, quality schools and learning success has been more focused on the school rather than society.

> School failure is represented as the responsibility of the schools and individuals (students and teachers), and is related to the adequacy of the educational product of the school and not to the socio-political, cultural and economic factors that influence education and which sociologists have been attempting to unravel for decades. (p. 42)

As indicated previously, teaching standards are important for a number of reasons; among these is the affect they have on student learning and the retention of students. It was an expectation by each state teacher registration body that by the end of 2013, a set of national standards for teachers becomes part of the national agenda for school reform, which also includes a national curriculum. The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers is a public statement of what constitutes teacher quality. The Standards should have a clear understanding of quality teaching and improved outcomes for students. The next stage of the process will involve Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership supporting the teacher regulatory authorities in each state and territory to implement the changes required by the nationally consistent approach (M. Evans, 2012).

Standardised expectations, which clearly state the work of teachers and make explicit the elements of high-quality, effective teaching, is part of improving retention of students and effects the living experiences of students. The following graph, Graph 13, an extension of Graph 12, reveals dissatisfaction by some students with the teaching styles, expectations and capacity of some of the teachers they had contact with while at school.

Graph 12 Negative comments about teachers from ELSS One



From studies such as Siek Toon Khoo and John Ainley (2005) there is evidence that student attitudes to school, and the intentions they have formed in the early years of

post-primary schooling, would affect their decision to participate in further education or training. Students' attitude to school, and learning, potentially have influence over educational intentions and continuation in formal learning through school and beyond (p. 1).

It should be pointed out that student attitudes in these early years of primary, and even secondary school, are very flexible and influenced greatly by such things as teaching practices, curriculum opportunities and the physical and emotional environment of the school. A further influence on attitude is the organisational structure of the school. A school very strict on discipline may not be as detrimental to a student's attitude as a school with rules enforced on an *ad-hoc* basis, with little or no consistency between teaching staff.

When I returned to look at the negative characteristics of teachers, as listed from ELSS responses, and spoke with the young people in the three discussion groups I began to question how much of the teacher-student relationship problem could be attributed to a lack of teaching skills from the students' point of view, and how much was attributed to student perceptions of personality clashes, that is, "the teachers do not like me."

The change in school structure, the middle school begins at year 9, and the change in hormones both come about just as the young child wants to see themselves as adults. They are trying to discover a sense of autonomy just as they are being met with a system which begins to compare their performance with that of their peers. By placing students into subjects based on ability our education system is also beginning to categorise students into those who may go on to university and those who may not.

> Biological changes are universal— found in all primates and all cultures. These internal stresses and the social expectations accompanying them—that the young person give up childish ways, develop new interpersonal relationships, and take on greater responsibility—are likely to prompt moments of uncertainty, self-doubt, and disappointment in all teenagers. Adolescents' prior and current experiences affect their success in surmounting these challenges. (Berk, 2006, p. 362)

Teenagers are just beginning to establish relationships structures, and yet, at the same time, they are met with the measurement of achievement, or a heightened awareness of which abilities they may lack in comparison to others. Instead of accentuating a positive in the life of the student the education system, by comparison testing, reminds them of what they cannot do.

As a student reaches year 9 in secondary school a number of changes may occur in their life. Apart from any hormonal changes, the Tasmanian student is usually undergoing formal testing or exams for the first time. This brings about a realisation by the student that future pathways are very much based on ability or meeting the requirements of a set of standards, such as pre-set criteria.

> Since the early 1990s, concerns regarding adolescent disengagement and alienation from classroom and school learning have generated systemic reform in the middle years of schooling...These students are experiencing the onset of puberty and have particular physical, emotional, social and cultural needs that require attention. (Rumble, 2010, p. 16)

The secondary school education program places less emphasis on simple tasks, such as may occur in the primary school classroom, and more stress on whether a student can be measured against a common set of pre-determined criteria. Using the results from this testing, the student is then compared to his or her peers. The process of ability ranking within subjects, or year groups, begins to place students into categories or groupings. Allocating students to particular ability groupings is not ideal, especially if completed too early in the student's school life. In some cases, it becomes detrimental to the student and can lead to early school leaving as discussed in a recent OECD (2012) publication.

> Limiting the number of subjects or duration of ability grouping, increasing opportunities to change tracks or classrooms and providing high curricular standards for students in the different tracks can lessen the negative effects of early tracking, streaming and grouping by ability (p. 10).

The use of ability grouping in Tasmania is not as prominent in schools as it once was when students in year 7 or year 8 were divided and some went to a high school for a possible academic future and the others were sent to a technical school for possible trade courses. The groupings most Tasmanian students generally face fall into two main categories due to finance and the school curriculum offerings. The first is a VET program, that is, where students not expected to attend university are prepared for a particular vocation; the second, an academic course suited to university entrance requirements. When the students cannot meet the ability requirements, they may become de-motivated. The courses are chosen for the student based on their previous testing. These courses may not be suited to the individual student and their ability or future goals.

Students may not have an interest in the course yet it is selected for the student due to the restrictions imposed by the curriculum being offered at the school. At this point, is it any wonder why students wish to leave school prior to the end of year 12? Disinterest in the course material, a sense of never achieving, a perceived lack of support for personal goals and both direct and indirect indications of classroom failure can result in early school leaving.

> Students who experience repeated failure may come to believe that nothing they can do will alter the situation. They attribute their failure to fixed, personal inadequacies (such as low ability) and so expect their actions will be futile in the future, just as they have been in the past. Effort is seen as useless. Caught in this situation, students may simply give up. Negative feelings about learning, low self-esteem, avoidance of challenge and lack of effort accompany their declining performance (p. 4).

From the interviews I conducted with the three different groups, former students who had left early stated they actually preferred rules, as they then knew the boundaries when those rules were constantly and consistently applied. They were also very quick to point out that many teachers who were strict, were also the ones who cared the most about them. Helen, one of the participants in the discussion group, said, *"I remember a teacher we used to call 'Morag', after an actor on an Australian TV program who played the part of a 'witch', because of the way her strict attitude left us scared of her. Yet she cared so much for us, even though she was very strict, she used to help us make our formal dress after classes so we could save money. Yet none of the other teachers or students knew about it."* Likewise, a school that allows student involvement in the

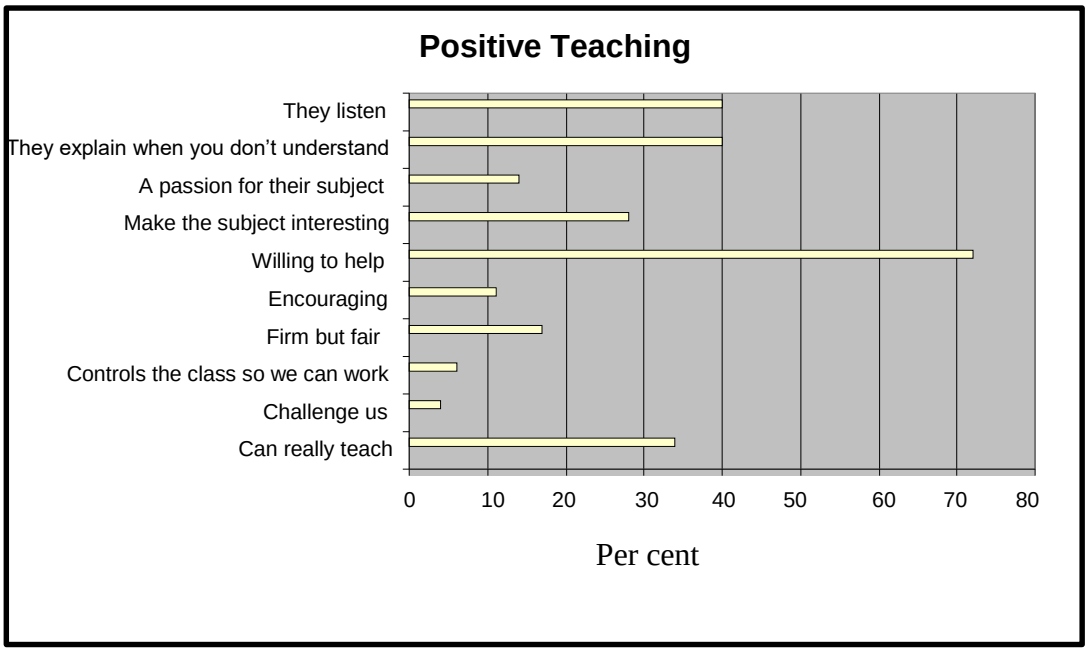
establishment of structures and the school's ongoing strategic plan will generate a greater sense of belonging and create positive attitudes among the student body.

When I asked the various groups what was it that made a good teacher from the student's perspective, the qualities which kept being repeated were qualities such as firmness, compassion and being positive. Many students said they preferred strict teachers who were consistent and did not put up with "crap." Most then went on to say they also valued those teachers who showed some form of care or concern for them. The teachers who "try to build a good relationship with you" are among those the students admired. The other category of teacher who was looked upon in a good light by the early school leavers were those teachers who tried to make their classes interesting with a variety of teaching methods.

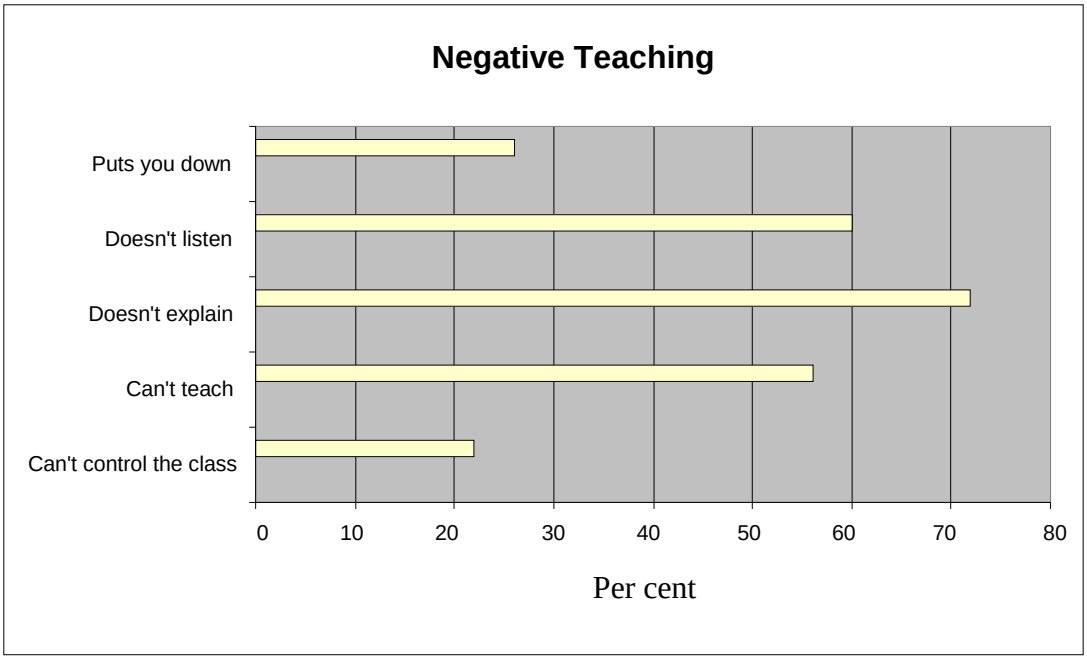
Another example, provided by a member of the group, Kathleen, was about a mathematics teacher, who was very demanding academically, but who made her classes very interesting. *"You could not arrive late, or without a calculator, and she did not wait for late comers, she began work straight away. Yet the same teacher worked after school hours, helping us get ready for entrance exams that were held before trainee positions were granted."*

From the ELSS some of the positive characteristics of teachers were, "can really teach," "challenge us, controls the class so we can work," "firm but fair," "encouraging," "willing to help," "make the subject interesting," "a passion for their subject," "they explain when you don't understand and they listen. Among the negative characteristics were such things as, "can't control the class," "can't teach," "doesn't explain," "doesn't listen," "puts you down."

Graph 13 Positive teaching comments



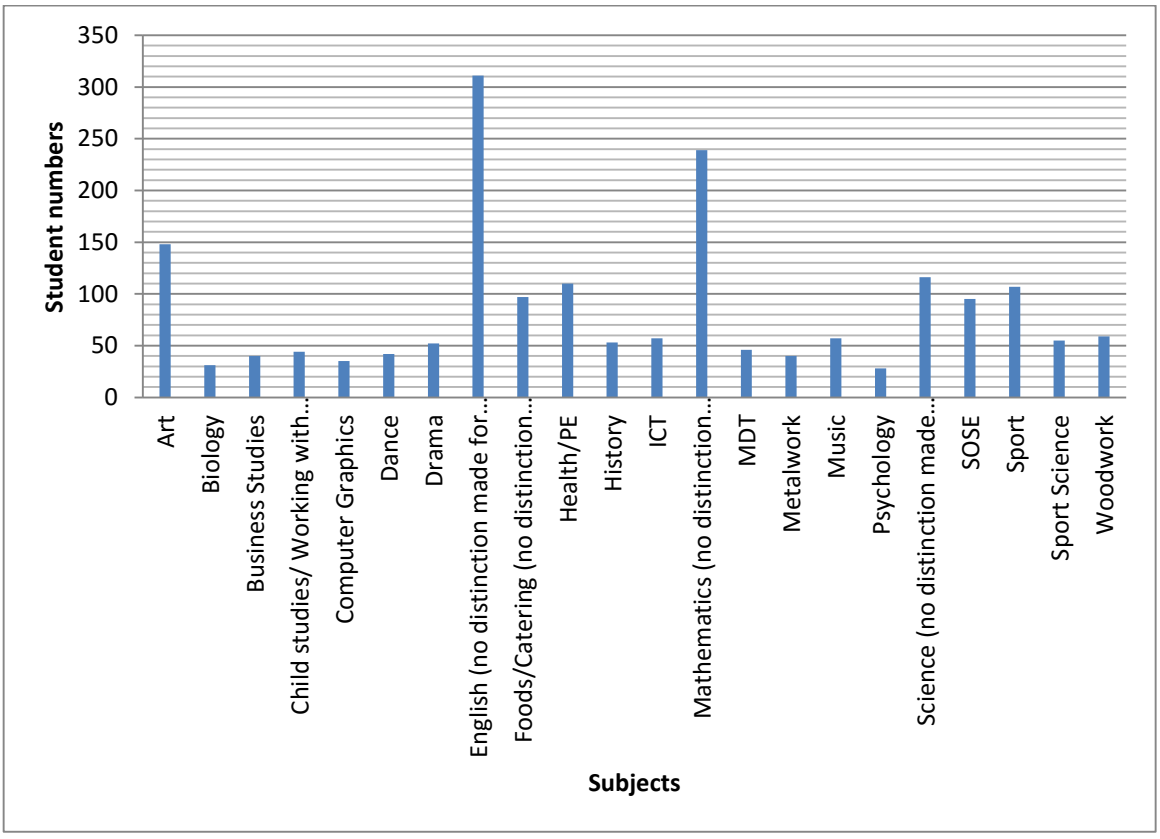
Graph 14 Negative teaching comments



If a student is constantly faced with the negative characteristics mentioned above there are obvious reasons why that student would become uninterested in the subject and therefore fall even further behind in the standard or level required.

When you look at the list of negative characteristics, student perceptions about teachers would make it very difficult for the marginalised student or the disenfranchised student to begin a fresh start and try to improve on involvement and performance. From the responses, 66 per cent of students surveyed felt that the teacher was in some way, scary, smelly, angry, rude, sarcastic, too easy going, unfair, two faced, self-centred, patronising...and the list goes on. From this I could extrapolate and say that 66 per cent of a class had no positive connection with the teacher in that class.

Graph 15 Selection of subjects students enjoyed the most



At this point I refer to the survey responses shown in Graph 16 above. I had included this section in the survey for two reasons. First, the schools wanted to know which subjects the students liked or did not like in order to see if their subject counselling system was working. While this may have assisted the school it would also be difficult to say from the responses whether the subject was liked or disliked because of choice, or whether it was due to the way it was taught. Secondly, I wanted to use this information as a discussion point with the personal interviews carried out with the three groups. It would allow me an opportunity to ask the former students how they felt about the various subjects and whether they liked or disliked the subjects they did at school. From this, I hoped to be able to tell whether it was the subject choice or whether it was teaching styles. The discrepancies between mathematics and science on the likes and dislikes section was discussed with some of those young people being interviewed. Sandra, a member of the local group who responded to my advertisements, gives an example. "*I had begun to dislike both mathematics and science in year 9, I had a different teacher than in my year 7 and year 8 classes. I found it hard to understand my new teacher and therefore I had poor results compared to earlier, my subject selection in year11 and year 12 was limited because of my science and mathematics and I began to hate school."* Sean, a member of the students who were thinking of leaving, said, *"I wanted to do science and maths in year 11 and 12 to help me get a traineeship in a trade. But I felt that the year 10 science and maths teachers were teaching at a level for those who wanted to go on to university after year 12 and I could not keep up with the class."*

I fear some teachers, perhaps, are more concerned with student results because of how it may reflect on them rather than the best interests of the student. Again, the ethical

nature of teaching is important. If extra rewards are given to quality teaching based on student results this could be more pronounced. "What is ethically required of progressive educators is that, consistent with their democratic dream, they respect the educands, and therefore never manipulate them" (Freire & Freire, 2004, p. 67).

Schools, as part of a system, are constantly expecting students to meet guidelines and both state and national achievement standards. In Australia these standards are called the National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). NAPLAN tests cover skills in reading, writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation, and numeracy. The school and the government education department obtain the results in order to know where students are against a set of standards or expectations. By using standardised testing, such as NAPLAN, the education system is now looking at the overall picture of finance and performance of schools and teachers. It has been suggested that a school under pressure for funding can no longer be concerned about the individual's progress along the learning continuum (Wyn, 2009).

> Schools have always aimed for a culture of perfection. The current idea of ranking schools based on student performance, and even the concept of rewarding quality teachers with higher income, has increased the pressure for a school to have better student results on national testing. (Dulfer, Polesel, & Rice, 2012, p. 6)

The media in the United Kingdom and Australia have referred to this as a league table where schools are ranked according to student performance, and parents are able to select the highest ranking school. To retain a reputation some schools only cater for the more academic student or only include achievers in their testing programs (Farrah, 2013). What criteria are used to decide who is a quality or effective teacher? If it is solely the

number of students reaching a set standard, then it is possible and even likely that figures will be fudged or students who cannot achieve will be moved out of the classroom. This has already occurred overseas and in particular, in Georgia, a state in the United States of America.

> Georgia Governor Nathan Deal announced Tuesday that widespread cheating inflated Atlanta Public Schools' 2009 state standardized tests scores.
>
> The product of a two-year investigation, the report concluded that systematic cheating occurred within Atlanta Public Schools— which had been lauded for its quick testing gains— including at least 44 of the 56 examined schools. The report implicated 38 principals, noting that 178 educators pled the Fifth Amendment when questioned. Eighty-two other educators confessed to various forms of cheating, including erasing wrong answers on students' multiple choice exams and then replacing them with the correct ones. (Resmovits, 2011)

The Australian figures for the 2010 and 2011 national literacy and numeracy tests (NAPLAN) testing results as released by the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (2012) indicate that some cheating is occurring. While the numbers are small there is still a perception that this is more widespread and possibly a standard practice. The reported figures for 2010 are twelve substantiated cases, fourteen unsubstantiated and three cases under investigation. The figures for 2011 indicate nine substantiated, 13 unsubstantiated and zero under investigation (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2010).

Students stay or turn away

When the education system measures ability by using standardised testing the nature of these tests may often miss some innate skills that students have. The educational value of a standardised test is important, especially to locate areas of concern and to validate achievements across a nation. If they are used to place students into categories of ability, then so much can be missed.

> These days, if a school's standardized test scores are high, people think the school's staff is effective. If a school's standardized test scores are low, they see the school's staff as ineffective. In either case, because educational quality is being measured by the wrong yardstick, those evaluations are apt to be in error. (Tasmanian Qualification Authority, 2010, p. 8)

Whatever the compounding constraints, which heed teachers and systems to connect with schools, students stay or turn away. John's innate skills were never revealed at school. He was perceived as an underachiever. He was constantly told where he did not "measure up" against others in his year group. *"I left school early and was fortunate enough to obtain an apprenticeship in welding, though I had shown no interest in this area while at school. At 21 years of age, I was nominated for the apprentice of the year because of my skills and ability. Although I did not win, my boss has appointed me as the mentor for the other apprentices. I enjoy teaching others the skills that almost seem to come to me as part of my nature and natural ability. I could just "see how things needed to be done" without anyone telling me."*

Compounding constraints such as whether or not a teacher is under pressure, either self-imposed or education system imposed, to complete a curriculum they perceive

to be overcrowded and have no time to repeat the study of a topic with the students. Whether or not overcrowding of the curriculum is made worse by constant 'add-ons' to the teaching program which arrive from the whim of politicians or the demands of some in society, and whether or not a Senate Committee comes with evidence such as this. "Curriculum requirements have increased as a result of community, educational, employer and political pressures. Often quite small, but well organised, groups can succeed in having their particular interests included in the curriculum" (Secretariat of the Senate Employment Education and Training References Committee, 1998, p. 137).

In this era, the parents are no longer the prime social educator even though they should perhaps hold onto this duty. Teachers may be expected by various interest groups to explain about sex education, road safety, alcohol and drug abuse, social standards, values and ethics. Teachers may be targets of community groups who can justify their concern as educational and see teachers as a means to get their message through to the community.

> The education sector is by its nature a unique tool for spreading HIV/AIDS information and awareness. It often receives the lion's share of public revenues, and is usually the major employer of public staff in a country. If the education sector was effectively used as a channel for promoting HIV/AIDS awareness, one could reach a very large audience. (Carr-Hill, Katabaro, Katahoire, & Oula, 2002, p. 100)

Students leave or stay whether the education system attempts or not to re-engage students who are de-motivated by ability comparison testing or by introducing courses

that are supposed to take students' interests seriously. As educators, we might see good possibilities in broadening the range of courses we teach. We might agree that

> Providing access for students to their best educational options requires a collaborative assessment and planning process involving the student, their parent/caregiver, the school principal and the program provider or employer. The decision-making process must take into account not only the anticipated outcomes of participation in the course or program but also the social and emotional wellbeing of the student. (Department of Education and Training, 2004, p. 2)

We might advocate that the education system could be offering opportunities that are not mainstream but suit the interests or skills of the 24 per cent of students, who stated in the ELSS that they were thinking about leaving before the end of year 12.

Whatever quality control of teachers, experimentation with curricula, change in policy and system structures, and results in league tables, students leave or stay. I become, as I write, more convinced that students do not stay when they feel alienated in a school. They stay if there is a significant person they can turn to with trust, confidence and respect, especially if that person is their teacher.

Chapter Seven

When does the pattern for early school leaving begin and in what ways does it form?

Patterns of behaving

Some of the childhood behaviours which may affect the decision to leave school early are truancy, bullying and poor behaviour. Anh Le, Paul Miller, Andrew Heath and Nick Martin (2003) show from their research that adverse childhood behaviours are linked to both early school leaving and poor labour market outcomes. Their research and data were based on young adolescent twins who had been recorded in the Australian Twins registry. A study by Shane Jimerson, Byron Egeland, Alan Sroufe, and Betty Carlson (2000) found that the decision to drop out of school is a process that begins before the student enters elementary (primary) school and continues until the individual finally leaves school. Their research looked at problems in year one, year six and when the student was 16 years old.

Despite decades of so-called ‘equality of opportunity’, there are barriers to school success that many young people, particularly from working-class backgrounds, are unable to overcome. Many such young people become disillusioned with school from an early stage in their abbreviated educational careers. Some bail out early, often after an unsuccessful transition for primary to secondary school. Some plug on in a joyless fashion, sometimes acting out their discomfort and frustration through actively resisting teachers, school norms and school expectations (Angus, 2006, p. 59). Using data from the

National Pupil Database, researchers in the United Kingdom have found that poor literacy and numeracy skills at age seven result in a desire by the student to leave school early.

> Each year, 8 per cent of children leave primary school with literacy and numeracy levels below those of the average 7-year old. Children who never acquire good levels of the core skills of literacy, numeracy and oral language are much more likely to become frustrated and disengaged with their learning—between half and three quarters of children excluded from school have significant problems. (Sodha & Guglielmi, 2009, p. 8)

Similar research on literacy and numeracy skills and later academic achievement (Peter Cole, 2001; Stephen Black, 2005; Robyn Penman, 2004) has been completed in Australia. As reported in the ACER Longitudinal survey of Australian youth

> Achievement levels in literacy and numeracy among the 1995 year 9 cohort showed a strong relationship with early school leaving. Those performing at low levels were substantially more likely to have left school before year 11. This was more pronounce The same pattern was shown in another study looking at those who completed high school in year 12 and those who didn't. There was a steep achievement gradient in school completion. As the achievement level decreased, the rate of school completion fell away dramatically. (Penman, 2004, p. 9)

Disruptive behaviour in a classroom is a broad term that is interpreted in different ways. It might mean that students distract other students and the teacher, or they turn their attention away from other students and the teacher to modern distractions like texting on

mobile phones or playing games on iPads. Harry Daniels, John Visser, Ted Cole and Neil De Reybekill (1999) relates certain scenarios with disruptive behaviour.

> Work skills – presentation, care of books, homework, settling to work, following instructions, requesting appropriate help, accepting advice.
>
> Verbal behaviour – refuses to follow instructions, talks when teacher talks, talks to teacher when should be working, shouts out, mimics, threatens other pupils or teacher, makes inappropriate noises.
>
> Non-verbal behaviour – leaving classroom, wanders about classroom, fidgets in seat, horseplay, and disrespect for other people's property.
>
> Emotional profile – cries easily, tantrums, isolated from peers, physical self-abuse, cannot express emotions.
>
> Personal organisation – absenteeism, late, leaving coat on, failing to bring books or kit. (Daniels, Visser, Cole, & De Reybekill, 1999) as quoted by (Bentham, 2002, p. 137)

Disruptive behaviour in the classroom is a "dual edged sword." On a personal level, it affects the student's own study, performance and overall results. At a class level, it is distracting and time consuming for both students and teachers. According to the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) research Australian teachers spend 14 per cent of their teaching time trying to maintain order in the classroom (Davidson, Jensen, Klieme, Vieluf, & Baker, 2009). This equates to approximately 3.5 teaching hours per week. Key results observed in TALIS (2008) include data which indicates one teacher in four in most countries loses at least 30 per cent of the lesson time, and some

lose more than half, in disruptions and administrative tasks (Weatherby, Bélanger, Overduin, Normandeau, & Versini, 2008).

Disruptive behaviour by students come from their poor school performance, being bullied at school, their social activities after school hours, their home life and family structure or undiagnosed learning difficulties, such as Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. One of the young people from the local discussion group, Karla, told me her school problems and behaviour problems resulted from dyslexia. *"I had dyslexia but did not know, when I was finally diagnosed my mum paid for extra assistance but because I was placed in a "special" group I felt isolated and my behaviour became a lot worse than it had been."*

Poor behaviour may also be attributed to poor teaching technique, poor classroom management or a lack of professional development of staff.

> Thus, there is a clear emerging European and international consensus not only that teachers need more support regarding conflict resolution skills, classroom management techniques and assistance in fostering a positive classroom and school climate but that these are key factors in both student performance and prevention of early school leaving. (Downes, 2011, p. 27)

David Osher, Gale Morrison and Wanda Bailey (2003) found that an important factor associated with early school leaving amongst those with learning disabilities or emotional and behavioural disorders is a high rate of student mobility (p. 83). Exploring strategies to increase school completion Lamb and Rice (2008) extended the work of Osher et al. to state,

> ...this would suggest that optimal communication and coordination between educational providers, and between schools and welfare bodies, is essential in making sure that these students' needs continue to be met in spite of moves between schools, and increasing completion rates. Because some of these moves may be due to student expulsions, schools also need to be supported in trying to retain these challenging students in the one school setting. (p. 33)

When discussing reasons for leaving school amongst my three focus groups the predominant reason members gave for leaving school was that they were "kicked out." There was only one thing they did or one event they were involved in. They saw some injustice was done to them when the school principal asked them to leave the school. Upon closer questioning in one-to-one interviews, it became clear that that single action or event was usually the final one in a long stream of events. Trish stated, *"I was kicked out of class and then the school for hitting another student; they didn't give me any warning and they didn't ask me why I did it."* In a longer discussion with Trish, she revealed that she had been in various 'fights' throughout her school years. Both she and her mother had attended meetings with the principal at various times over Trish's behaviour. Trish did not understand that the meetings between the principal and her mother were warnings. She still believed that these meetings were just to let her mother know what she was doing.

Poor behaviour, or poor response to direction or instruction, was part of the cycle in the lives of these young people. Their behaviour in many situations throughout most of their school lives was deemed bad and incorrigible, perhaps in spite of the best intentions of teachers to help them learn, but eventually to the extent that they were asked to leave school. That cycle of behaviour would usually begin with the young people frequently

being unable to do class work that kept them abreast with the rest of the class. Continually “failing” would lead to a feeling of not belonging or not being valued. They might even be ‘diagnosed” by the teacher as suffering from ADHD and considered to be in need of medicine (pills) or help from the counsellor. “... students who already are at risk for poor academic and behavioural outcomes receive less instruction, and they fall further behind; subsequently, their minor behavioural problems escalate and they are more likely to be inappropriately referred for special education services.” (Oliver & Daniel, 2007, p. 3)

Poor behaviour, or a sense of failure, would lead to absenteeism. Research by Nola Purdie and Sarah Buckley (2010), suggests that non-attendance in schooling may also relate to poor parental attitudes towards schooling, society insufficiently valuing education and poor teacher quality. As Kay Kinder, Alison Wakefield and Anne Wilkin reporting on the main causes of absenteeism found,

> Main causes of truancy and disruptive behaviour among children over 7 years of age, in rank order were; (*i*) the influence of friends and peers, (*ii*) relations with teachers, often those lacking in respect for pupils, (*iii*) the content and delivery of the curriculum, (*iv*) family aspects, parents’ attitudes, domestic problems, (*v*) bullying and (*vi*) the classroom context, for example lack of control or pupils’ learning difficulties. (p. 5)

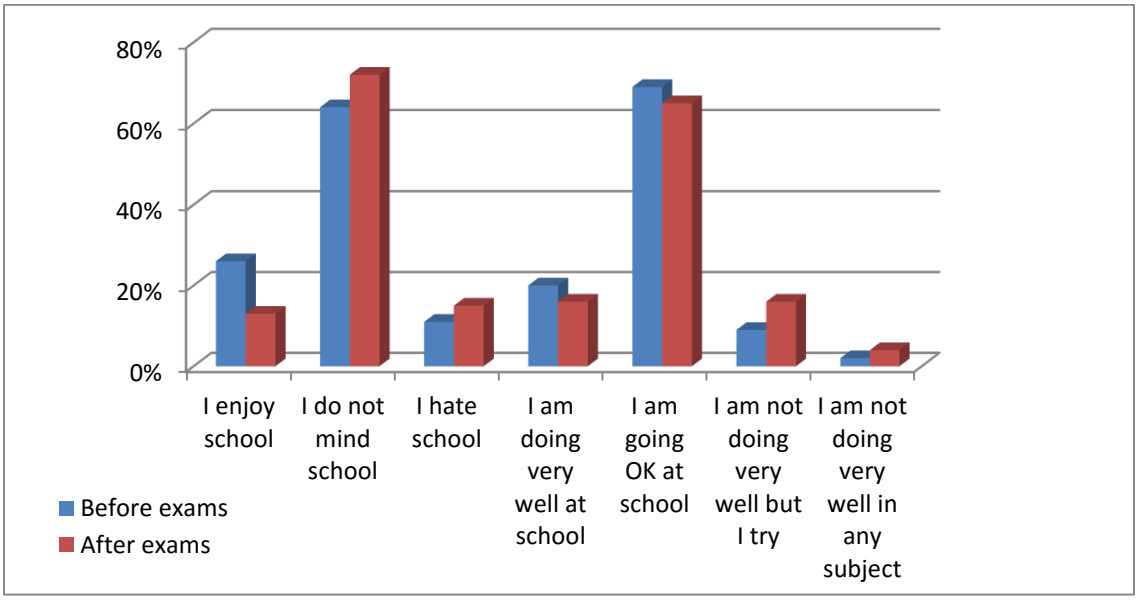
17 per cent of students who took part in my survey one said that they missed many classes. A further 8 per cent of the 361 students who said they would leave school prior to the end of year 12, said they were leaving because “I always feel dumb when in the classes.” Rejecting or refusing school can lead to many negative consequences. Short-

term problems may include family conflict, legal trouble, declining years, social alienation, and distress. According to Christopher Kearney, Dio Turner and Marisa Gauger (2010) long-term problems include delinquency, school dropout, and various occupational, economic, and social problems in adulthood.

The following graph displays the ways students in my surveys (ELSS One, Two and Three) perceived how they were achieving at school and their “enjoyment” of school. The graph compares responses from students in ELSS One who completed their responses prior to the mid-year examinations, and students from ELSS Two who completed their responses after the mid-year examinations. ELSS Two, the first of two follow-up groups, was completed in August of their final year. This was after they had received mid-year examination results and had a more realistic concept of their performance. The information garnered by the students and parents would have been obtained from their report but also parent/teacher interviews where attendance and behaviour would have been discussed.

Comparison of the graph below suggests that after students were presented with concrete evidence in their mid-year report, students' perception of their performance at school changed. The increase in numbers for the “I hate school” and the latter two choices “trying” and “not doing very well,” which firmly intimate that those students who believe they will not achieve any more benefit by remaining at school are likely to form the majority of a school’s early leavers.

Graph 16 Perceived performance at school



Another consequence of poor classroom behaviour is to be excluded from the class and produce a feeling of 'them and me'. This begins a cycle of rejection of young people who behave 'badly' by teachers and some classroom peers.

Eventually, some parents reject them.

> Children who are overly aggressive and disruptive of group activities are the ones preschool children tend to dislike. The same thing is true in elementary school.... Also, because behaviour becomes more differentiated as children get older, there may be an increasing number of ways to become rejected,...(Coie, Dodge, & Kupersmidt, 1990, p. 51)

What effect does the environment or culture have on the young person? To what extent are behaviour problems due to undiagnosed medical conditions? Does the structure and expectations of the student's family have an effect on his or her behaviour? The New

South Wales Department of Community Health presented the following report on causes of poor student behaviour.

> Theoretical models of developmental psychopathology, including the development of aggressive behaviour, are multi-factorial: child, parenting, familial and extra-familial variables are related to conduct problems. The number of factors implicated, and the potential developmental trajectories or pathways which may be followed, increase as the child's ecological contexts expand after the preschool period. (Family and Community Services, 2001, p. 3)

From my experience there have, in the past, been situations where students have been kept back a year (or retained, as they say in the United States) because it was believed the student's poor behaviour was due to a lack of maturity. That is, the parents would have been advised that it would be in the student's best interest if he or she repeated a class or year level. The benefit of this has not yet been proven and, in fact, there have been studies where this has led to students becoming early school leavers. For instance, Brian Jacob and Lars Lefgren (2009) say,

> We find that retention among sixth year students does not affect the likelihood of high school completion, but that retaining low-achieving eighth year students in elementary school substantially increases the probability that these students will drop out of high school. (p. 3)

Patterns of disengaging

According to members of the three discussion groups I worked with, it was problems of behaviour that led to disengagement from learning and often caused disengagement from

peer groups. *"After I began to get into trouble at school I decided to just wait until the end of the year and leave. I did not care about the subjects but as soon as I was 16, I knew I could get Youth Allowance* (Government Benefit). *Because I was not interested in classes, some of my friends began to ignore me, as they wanted to learn. I soon found that nobody wanted me so I mixed in with the kids who hung around the shopping centre." (Tim)*

Erica Frydenburg, Mary Ainley and Jean Russell (2005) says that engagement by students and between students and teachers is an important outcome of schooling, perhaps a predictor of, if not a strong relationship to, achievement. "Engagement, defined at a broad level as a sense of school belonging, has a weak relationship to achievement, though it does influence whether students remain at school" (p. 2).

The World Health Organisation (2010) looked at medical reasons for student disengagement. Their report found there are a number of learning disorders which have been researched and attributed to medical conditions, such as ADHD. Other disorders have also been researched by medical personnel but are perhaps less known. Some children will have attachment disorders which prevent them connecting to others or trusting any attempt by others to establish a relationship (World Health Organisation Secretariat, 2010, p. 94).

For some students disengagement may begin in primary school and for others at the transition to secondary classes. For some, it begins in year 9 when class topics become more intense and students are beginning to look at career pathway planning. As head of a senior secondary campus, I have seen it occur during year 11 and year 12 when students suddenly realise they are not going to 'pass' the subjects they require for the

career they have chosen or, despite subject counselling, they have made the wrong choice of subjects. The year 9 to year 12 students' survey responses indicated that 13 per cent believe their current subjects were "not very good" because of the choices made. When questioned about with whom they discussed future education or career pathways, 41.1 per cent said parents and 37 per cent said friends. Teachers ranked at 16 per cent while counsellors only 6 per cent.

The initial cause of repeated behavioural problems or the spark that ignites behavioural problems may not be a fault of the school or the educational system. From my own lived experience as a child, and later as a teacher, the initial cause may be family based. My early school leaving was due to physical violence and family poverty. Other severe influences including violence, breakdown of marriage, sexual abuse, gambling problems and substance abuse may have had catalytic effects on a child. My observation of students and speaking with 'problem' students for over thirty years provided some of the following examples of what can occur in many of their young lives.

An instance of abuse, violence or an argument as a child leaves for school can be the trigger for poor behaviour in class. A comment by a peer or teacher, not directly aimed at a student, may be taken the wrong way and lead to resentment or anger in a student which results in creating a physical disturbance or delivering a verbal insult. Such reactions often result in the student "being in trouble" with the school authorities without the authorities being aware of the origin of the behaviour.

One of the focus group girls, Jane, stated that her problems at school first began because her father had made comments about how lazy she was and how fat she was. "*One day at school my year 4 teacher said something about the need to exercise*

regularly to the whole class. The teacher was looking at me so I knew he meant I was fat. I refused to do any physical education and then the students in my class began to tease me so I started hitting them when the teacher was not around. This led to my poor behaviour, and so every class I looked for a reason to get into a fight and now I am waiting to go to court for bashing another girl in the mall because she had stared at me."

There was one truly amazing exception to the above pattern of behaviour and that was Joe. Joe was born on the isolated West Coast of Tasmania and began primary school there. *"When I was in year 3 primary, my dad was sent to jail. My mum did not want to be isolated on the West Coast so she and I moved to Hobart, initially so I could maintain contact with my father. Unfortunately, mum moved into the local drug culture and from then on, I had to look after myself. Naturally, I did not enrol in primary school and mum did not seem to care. I gradually met the young people who were hanging with mum's drug group and so I began to hang out with them. Eventually I became involved in drinking to excess and then in the drug culture myself."*

At no time was there a follow-up between the West Coast and Hobart education or community welfare regions to see what had happened to this boy. That is not necessarily a criticism of the system but an instance of what could happen in the stages of families transferring between regions if the parent or parents do not take action. Joe, at 15 years of age, enrolled in a youth help program at the local TAFE. Here he learnt to write and read. He told many stories of what had happened to him over the six or seven years wandering the streets of Hobart. All Joe wanted to do was become a butcher.

Together, he and I worked on basic math skills, how to write a resume and what to do in an interview. We phoned and/or door knocked a number of butcher shops.

Unfortunately, he was unsuccessful, partly because of his age and partly because of his lack of educational skills. Many potential employers were concerned about his ability to complete the TAFE course. When we parted company, Joe was intending to enrol in further trade courses in an endeavour to make himself more desirable as an employee. It was not that Joe hated school or had learning difficulties, he had not had the opportunities that many other students are given. Joe was by far the worst—and the most successful—case of truancy that I came across in my research and interviews.

A common point raised by all members of the discussion groups was absenteeism from both school and classes. While sporadic absenteeism began early in their school life by the time the early school leavers had reached year 9, most parents did not respond to school notification of truancy. As a number of interviewees said, *"My parents had given up as we only had fights about it and by that time they didn't care."* Many others in the interview groups voiced similar examples. When asked why they bothered to return to school at all, it was because they were bored at home or they wanted to see their friends or to take part in a school event such as a play or a sporting team. In reality, they still felt some connection to the school but the connection was loose and often broken until more of their friends left school too and they could "hang around" with them. From my survey, 17 per cent of students who answered the question on school performance said they missed many classes through being absent.

One particular reason for being absent from school raised by a number of the interview group was the influence of their year to year record of behaviour and achievements they believed to be held by the school. As this was passed on from year to year the early leavers found it more and more difficult to hold a trusting and strong bond

with a staff member. Mitch, one of the street kids, gave a good example of family history and bad reputation following him during his years at school. He told me he could remember a year 4 primary teacher saying to him when he had done something wrong, "You Joneses are all the same. Your brother was like that and I bet the rest of you are too." "*As far as I could remember this was the first time I had been in trouble but from then on I think all teachers believed I was "guilty" even if I had not done anything. I was constantly being compared to my brother and so I decided to "carry on like it" as I was going to be blamed anyway. In about year 8 or 9 at high school one of the teachers told me the staff would talk about me in the staff room. This was when I first thought about leaving as I did not believe I would be given a "fair go" in class."* In the years when most students are looking to the future and how to gain the best assessments Mitch was more concerned about being given a fair opportunity. When the chance to leave school came at the end of year 10 he took it thinking he would be no worse off away from the teachers who "hated" him. After this Mitch could not find employment and eventually was "kicked out" by his step-dad.

Jessie provided another example of the "blaming the teacher" response. "*My sister had been very good at sport while I did not enjoy it and was uninterested in any sporting activity. Even though I did not attend training or wish to partake the teachers still picked me to play. When I constantly performed poorly, the teacher presumed I was lazy and was not trying. I was labelled by the staff as a lazy student and the teachers would not give me help in class."* Whether what Jessie said is true or not, what is important is how Jessie felt and what she believed. Later, Jessie got a part-time job with a food chain and gradually worked herself into a shift manager's position. She left school

early in order to work more hours but eventually the job became a social hindrance and at 22, she became unemployed and was still unemployed two years later, and had the added responsibility of bearing a young child.

Yet one more example of misconceiving a student's ability or record came from Emma. Emma was one of my students. She was a "Goth", that is, a young person who dresses mostly in black with pale makeup and unusually dark lipstick, her hair is dyed black and she identifies with a particular style of music. She is of middle-class society and intelligent. Emma had embraced being a Goth since she was in year 9. Most of the students spoke to her but did not include her in their social events. Lack of acceptance by the students and the misunderstanding that Goths are interested in death, dying and self-harm found Emma labelled, "weird." I am sorry to say that some of my staff at school also felt this way and Emma was often left out of plays or class activities. By the time Emma reached senior secondary classes she was very much a loner and was often, as she said, "picked on" by staff for small things. Emma decided to leave school but before she went, she asked me if she could sing at a school assembly as some of the students often did. With some trepidation and concern about Emma's acceptance by the students I said she could. Emma sang and could she sing! Her voice was a beautiful operatic style voice that had the assembly sitting in silence and awe. At the end of the song, Emma received a standing ovation. When everyone had settled she stepped up to the microphone and said, *"I am leaving, you people do not know me and you did not want to know me."* Emma left the school and the state. I recently received an e-mail from her to say she was at university as a mature age student and she was quite happy. We now keep in irregular contact via Facebook.

Among the early school leavers, there was a “peer support group” kind of attitude. Of those surveyed 11 per cent (approximately 105 students) had said they were thinking about leaving school because their boyfriend or girlfriend had left or was leaving. A further group of twenty students said that they would be leaving because they no longer had friends at the school. The three discussion groups repeated this idea of leaving school early if your friends had left or were going to leave. As mentioned earlier, there appears to be a critical point where enough of your friends are skipping classes or school to entice you to leave on a permanent basis. Another point, which arose in the interviews, was that once you began to gain a reputation for being absent or being in trouble, your friends expected you to continue this behavioural pattern. Even if you knew the answers to questions in class you did not attempt to answer them—your friends would not like it or they would “stir you” when you got out of class, that is, they would tease and ridicule you.

We all have tremendous potential—it is just that some people cannot see how to reach that potential or why they should bother to try to reach that potential. When this occurs with our students, we speak of lack of motivation or an attitude problem or no self-discipline. We all desire good results from our efforts and we like to have those results acknowledged. The problem with early school leavers is that often we do not recognise their results as being ‘good’ and yet they might be the best a student can achieve.

While we are born with potential and the ability, in most cases, to utilise that potential to acquire desired results, often people do not achieve this goal. Self-belief, attitude, and motivation will either hinder or support the intensity of our actions towards

reaching our goals.

Our attitude determines how many of our goals we allow ourselves to reach. It decides the magnitude of our hopes and influences the strength of our determination when we are faced with new challenges. Yet what of the long-term dreams of the early school leaver? Remember Joe, he wanted to be a butcher, that was his dream and reason for enrolling in the self-help course at TAFE. It is doubtful if Joe will ever reach his goal and what happens to Joe if he does not, after all of his own self-driven efforts. Does he return to drug use if his motivation and attitude fall? These are questions far too difficult to answer in this thesis. We speak to students about their resilience and self-esteem. If you are someone whose self-esteem takes a battering and you have struggled to raise it, and it is battered again what happens? People can have an effect on our attitude by teaching us poor thinking habits or unintentionally misinforming us or providing us with negative sources of influence. We can see that constant rejection or 'put downs' that occur in the lives of those young people who leave school early must influence their attitude, constrain their goals and inhibit their motivation.

Having the right attitude is one of the basics that success requires. The combination of a sound personal philosophy and a positive attitude gives us an inner strength and a firm resolve that influences all the other areas of our existence. Most parents, teachers and psychologists agree that in terms of behaviour, children need to know their limits. Limit-setting gives children a feeling of safety and security, but as our children reach the early school age years and then the pre-teen years, it is important that they learn to rely less and less on parents' setting limits, and more and more on setting

limits themselves. In other words, we want our children to learn to become self-disciplined. Our object in setting limits is for the child to develop his or her own limits.

Children who have developed a strong sense of self-discipline and motivation deal with peer pressure and life's up and downs a lot better than those children who do not have these skills. As parents and teachers, we ought to aspire to help our children achieve a sense of self-discipline and motivation by not only giving them the means for dealing with disappointment and setbacks but perhaps more beneficially, helping them to understand them. When they are very young, we set limits for them: what is good food, when to sleep, what they can read, how much television they can watch, and so on. Some schools are teaching philosophy and critical thinking in hope that students might learn to make good decisions for themselves. If you have not been taught self-discipline as a child how are you expected to be self-disciplined as an adult?

In a United States of America study, Angela Duckworth & Martin Seligman (2005) state:

> Highly self-disciplined adolescents outperformed their more impulsive peers on every academic-performance variable, including report-card years, standardized achievement-test scores, admission to a competitive high school, and attendance...We found that self-discipline predicted academic performance more robustly than did IQ. Self-discipline also predicted which students would improve their years over the course of the school year, whereas IQ did not. (p. 941)

They go on to say that when other factors are considered, it still comes down to the self-discipline skills the young person has.

> Underachievement among American youth is often blamed on inadequate teachers, boring textbooks, and large class sizes. We suggest another reason…their failure to exercise self-discipline...many of America's children have trouble making choices that require them to sacrifice short-term pleasure for long-term gain, and that programs that build self-discipline may be the royal road to building academic achievement. (p. 944)

Self-discipline is an important skill for young people to learn. Not every class will be enlightening, enjoyable or fun-filled. Students will come to class tired, perhaps hungry, perhaps in an after-lunch drowse or distracted by a number of things. They will need skill to rise and not give in at the first obstacle.

We must remind ourselves that not all students have an equal start to their education or a nurturing situation at home. Without family structures, parental involvement or models of good parental skills, and living in poor home situations, many early school leavers learn their own limits. They do because they must very early in their lives. Who can blame these young people for watching endless hours of television or for being uninterested in activities where they have no support?

Phil, who responded to the advertisements and became a member of the discussion group, spoke of his early home experiences and how they had made it easier for him to give up trying. *"From as early as I could remember I had the responsibility of getting the younger brothers and sisters ready for school and then looking after them when I got home. I did not know my dad and mum was trying to keep a full-time job. I usually got the tea ready or sat the younger ones in front of the television and went to listen to music. I did not have anywhere to do homework and was usually too tired to do*

some even if I did have a space. Because I shared a room with my two younger brothers, when they went to bed I went and watched television or went out and hung around with my mates. I usually stayed home to look after them if one of my brothers or sisters was sick. I stopped caring about school and now I am working on a part-time basis at the same factory my mum worked. I just wanted to earn enough money so I could leave home. If I can't get a full-time job, me and my girlfriend are going to have a baby so she can get the government baby bonus and a house from the government housing department." When we spoke about the future, Phil had very little response. Any response he offered to my questions centred on the next month or six months. Phil had no concept of what he would like to do in ten years time.

We see now in this chapter many things in the lives of young people who become early school leavers that tend to evolve patterns of behaving in their worlds within the limits and constraints of opportunities they follow or reject. Patterns of behaving become patterns of disengaging

Patterns of Fear

Rod, one of the street kids, said *"I left school because I hated the teachers. They constantly told me I was going to fail or they just "accepted" my work as being of a lower standard than others in the class. I did not put much effort into my work nor study for class tests, because I knew I was going to fail anyway."* I took Rod's response of accepting failure and raised it with each of the others involved in the discussion. Accepting failure, most said, was easier than doing the class work as "you are going to fail anyway." As I sought more conversation about this, they focused more on their

experiences of accepting failure in tests or exams and believing that some teachers marked their work harder, because they knew "you could not possibly pass" or "understand the topic."

Leith, who had dropped out because he knew his parents could not afford to help him go to university, said *"I had left and got a job. While at school, I had seen some friends pressured into not trying by other students. Some teachers gave better marks for essays or marked tests easier for those students who spoke up in class, or who challenged the teacher about their marks."* Leith said, *"It seemed as though teachers had a set list of marks and placed the kids against the marks rather than look at what standard of work was presented."*

"My sister left early, because she said if you failed lots of tests everyone treated you as if you were dumb." These words were spoken by Magenta, who was a member of the group of current students who had stated they were thinking of leaving school before the end of year 12, or who had friends or siblings leave early. Magenta went on to say her sister, Susie, had been asked to run messages by the teacher or help with charity collections because *"it did not matter how much school she missed."*

If there is already pressure on students to achieve a higher standard or leave, imagine how much pressure is added if funding and selection of staff will come to rely solely on performance against other schools. In the school yard, there may be no greater stigma than being called a loser by your peers. The concept of 'loser', while perhaps beginning as a student joke, may soon lead to young people turning away from any activity that can lead them to 'failure'. They may develop such a fear of failing that they avoid any situation which may lead to competition. As mentioned in the discussion

groups, “why try when you know it's not going to be good enough, and you're going to fail anyway.” This fear of failure often leads to avoidance of activities or feigning sickness.

Reputation Enhancement Theory posits that individuals choose a particular self-image that they wish to promote before a peer audience and this audience provides feedback. For people who have prospects of achievements within the prevailing social order, the criteria of a good reputation will be consonant with those of the system, such as success at school and career advancement. Other young people may perceive or experience these options as closed to them—their response is to seek to establish a self-enhancing reputation through other means and with reference to other criteria (Carroll, Hattie, Durkin, & Houghton, 2001).

One member of the volunteer group, Pamela, said her parents did not worry about her schoolwork because she was a girl and did not need to go to school after year 10. Pamela said she blamed herself because she failed some tests earlier in her school life, and, so, her parents did not have high expectations for her. Another member of the same group, Jessica, said she had a similar experience, but hated school because she always failed tests. She said she just expected to perform badly on all tests and examinations, and so when she did fail it was not so bad. Jessica, in my opinion, had very low self-esteem, and I spent considerable time with her discussing goal-setting and raising self-expectations. In order to help Jessica develop these skills, she and I worked on very short-term, achievable goals. Once she had relearned how to succeed we then began establishing more extended goals. When I last saw Jessica she was intending to enrol in a TAFE course.

Fear of failure among students can have a paralysing effect. Some students, as mentioned, take a “don't care” attitude, which may be hiding their fear that they are unable to measure up against the standards of others in the class. Students are often too afraid to answer questions in class, read aloud or offer input. This fear can come from worry about being labelled a ‘loser’, others laughing at them, always being wrong, and even teacher put-downs, as mentioned in two ELSS responses that reported teachers who had told them they were “stupid”. When you consider the academic process used to classify students according to ability and the recognition given in assemblies to those who achieve, it is very likely there are students who see everything we do in schools as accentuating the concept that failure is bad. Awards, assemblies, examination results, and most graduation evenings are all established to praise the achievers. As John Shindler (2010) writes in part two of his book *Transformative Classroom Management*, when looking at classroom management and motivation, “teachers should avoid putting students in situations in which they are competing for rewards, especially meaningful rewards. Teachers should only use competition only when all students are in an equal position to display the behaviour if they choose to do so” (p. 118).

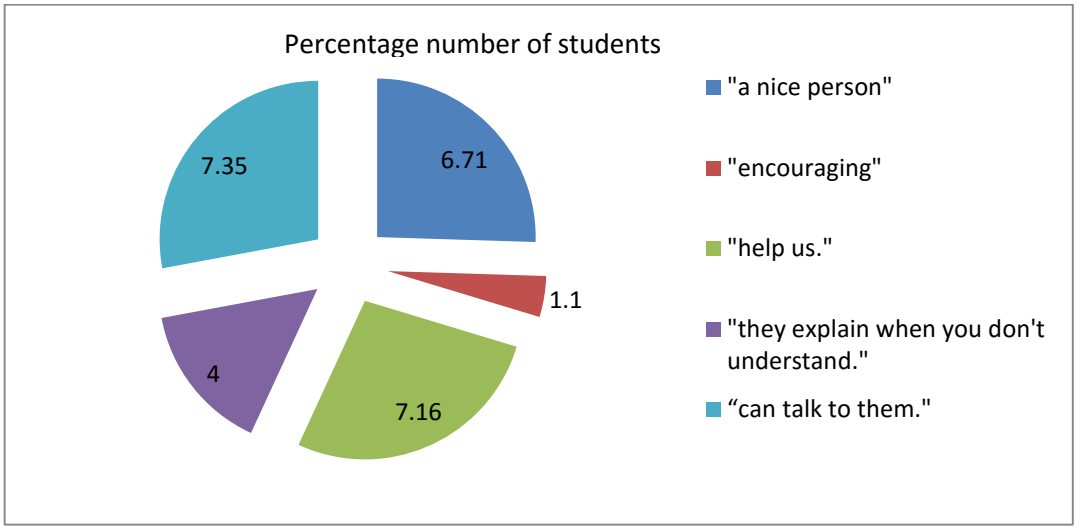
Once a student gets to years 10, 11 and 12, the testing and examination procedure often relies on correct responses rather evidence of critical thinking. Ted McCain, (2005) says, “Building students’ confidence is a critical aspect of instruction that we often overlook in school. In our haste to cover curriculum and test content recall, we frequently don't allow students time to develop confidence in their abilities” (p. 41).

Students, just like groups in society, need encouragement and rewards to increase motivation. The ELSS One response revealed over 1500 positive comments relating to the

help, advice and encouragement from teachers. I have isolated some of the 'encouraging' content of the positive characteristics listed about teachers by the student in ELSS One as follows.

"a nice person"	105 students
"can talk to them"	105 students
"encouraging"/ "help us"	120 students
"they explain when you don't understand"	60 students

Graph 17 Encouragement from Teachers



The encouragement and confidence given to students depends on how broad a definition of success the students focus on. If teachers, and the education system, broaden the concept of success to include a range of skills and abilities and remove the narrow "Pass the Certificate" concept, then more students see the opportunities open to them to succeed. The 'broad' view ought perhaps to include such things as self-improvement,

skill development, personal progress, understanding new concepts, learning something new, personal bests and involvement or achievements in the broader community.
If students are already motivated they may see mistakes or poor performances not as a judgement, but as an opportunity for improvement. They become less fearful of performance and peer review and less inclined to look for a way out (Covington, 1992, p. 339).

Critical occurrences during which students may suffer experiences of attack on their self-esteem or a boost to their confidence may take place during the students' transition from primary school to secondary school, when the image of the suburb in which the student lives plays a deciding role in which high school the student must attend. In the discussion groups, some members indicated disappointment in not being able to choose the secondary school they attended. One in particular, Barbara, said she wanted to go to an independent school to develop her mathematics but her parents could not afford to send her. In the suburban area of Hobart, where this research study takes place, there are two single gender public high schools, one for boys and one for girls. Both of these have a large cohort of students, and there are many parents who want their son or daughter to attend these high schools because of their reputation. Because of the demand from all over Hobart, not all students can attend these schools, even though they are in the same suburban area as the residential address of the student. At this time of writing, there is an initiative developed and supported by the Principal and staff of a local public high school to obtain Federal Government funding to redevelop some of the high schools in this suburb and close down some of those which are no longer viable or whose physical resources have reached their 'use by date.' The general public view of the present high

schools is divided on family loyalty and ease of access. The presentation of these new models and ideas is beginning to generate a positive acceptance (ABC News, 2009).

The local image of the suburb has an effect on the attitude towards the school and the self-belief of some students who attend these schools. Students from outside the area often refer to the suburban area of this study as “where the Bogans come from.” The word “Bogan” is a derogatory term in Australia often used to refer to someone who may have some or all of the following characteristics and habits: dresses a particular way (such as, ugg boots, flannelette shirts and tracksuit bottoms), is unemployed, has a lack of personal hygiene, a distinct vocabulary, listens to particular music and lives in a poorly maintained house or government unit. Individuals from the same suburban area had previously been labelled with another derogatory term, "Chiggers" based on a locality in that suburb (Lauder, 2008, p. 1).

One of the schools, which took part in the ELSS, has two campuses, one in the greater city of Hobart and another in the suburban area of the study. In my administrative capacity at each of these campuses, I had met with parents, who had changed their home contact address because they thought the school’s enrolment allocations were based on where you lived. They did not want their child being placed at the campus in this particular northern suburb. Mildred and George were two such parents. When they received their daughter’s campus allocation letter, they made an appointment to see me. After listening to their request, I explained that a number of considerations were taken into account before allocations were made. For the next two weeks, George would call into my office each morning with details about other parents’ claims in his area, why his daughter should receive extra consideration and finally a change of address form. He

displayed mail and accounts to show he was no longer living at the old address. Weeks after accommodating the change in campuses, I learned the mail and accounts were actually his cousins who happened to have the same first initial.

Students and former students from the suburban area who took part in the discussion groups would often raise the point that young people from this area were not expected to go to university. Some even indicated that when they went for job interviews, or applied for a position, they used the addresses of their friends as their own postal code could, from their perspective, limit their employment opportunities. One example of this was Gaye, she showed me her curriculum vitae with her best friend's address but her own email and mobile phone number.

The lack of self-confidence, displayed by those in the discussion groups, was vastly different when they were with each other and when our discussions were aimed at them, their localities and their friends. They were often proud and confident about where they were from. When the discussion topic turned to overall school, environment, prospects and aspirations compared to other suburbs in Hobart, their attitudes changed. At first, they became defensive, and then there seemed a kind of resignation that the opportunities were not as good as those of young people who live elsewhere. Even within the same suburban area, some of the young people believed their street or subsection was worse than others in the same suburb. Sid, one of the volunteer group members, expressed his lack of self-confidence and concern about his residential address. Sid said that he had applied for lots of jobs, but could only get temporary labouring jobs. He said most businesses did not even write back to acknowledge his job applications. One of the guys he knew at school, who was "dumber" than Sid, used his older brother's address and

got a job that Sid had applied for. While this was Sid's perception, and there is no proof that his postcode was a contributing factor, the problem was that Sid believed it and the others in the discussion group were agreeing with him as he told his story. Sid has stopped applying for jobs and was now on unemployment benefit whilst picking up one or two cash jobs. He was even thinking about getting a utility truck and selling firewood.

Amongst teachers, I believe that as we see this pattern of fear in the eyes and lives of early school leavers, there are questions that must arise if we are to be orienting ourselves purposefully, democratically and fairly toward others in educational settings. What have we, as teachers, to learn about the influences that fear of judgement and rejection might have on the social behaviour, responsibility and choices that early school leavers might make as participants in society? For instance, why might some feel compelled to give false information about themselves to improve not only their image before others but also their self-image? On the other hand, who are their judges and upon what claims can their judges justify their judgements? These are serious questions for educators and educational systems. I have hope that this thesis might succeed to some extent to place such questions in front of education authorities.

Patterns of Motivation

The term "motivation" is derived from the Latin word meaning "to move." Thus, as Chris Smith, John Dakers, Wendy Dow, George Head and Margaret Sutherland (2005) report, it might be argued that motivation involves anything that moves an individual to action and, in the case of schools, what moves an individual to learn (Smith et al., 2005).

Poor attitude and a lack of self-discipline affect motivation, or in the case of early school leavers, cause lack of motivation. Motivation can come easily if there are rewards but these students found no rewards for them—they would never get to the top of the 'achievement ladder.' One primary school I know introduced a weekly Principal's Award. My first reaction was one of disappointment, as the same kids would gain these awards as well as the achievement awards. I soon discovered that these awards were developed for the distinct purpose of giving all students a chance to receive an award and have their names in the family newsletter. I had thought perhaps this will downgrade the value of the awards if everyone stands a chance of 'winning.' This was not to be the case. The reward of having your name in print was very valuable to all students and everyone became involved in making certain that any positive achievement was rewarded. This school went on to become a *WET* school. The school promoted a set of values based around being *Welcoming, Encouraging and Thanking*. The students from this primary school could have a very positive attitude and approach to life because of the motivation provided by the Principal.

What is the motivational trigger point in a school? While we understand that motivation is the action or word that moves a student to want to learn, we must also understand that each student is an individual and will therefore have different reasons or trigger points that makes them want to learn. For some it might be the goal of a future career, for others there may be some financial reward, and still a simple "well done" may motivate some. Some learners will be performance-orientated while others will be mastery-orientated. The performance-orientated students would see failure as a result of their lack of ability while the mastery-orientated student would see failure as a result of

their lack of effort and would presume that more work would lead to eventual mastery of the topic.

> The particular orientation towards a learning style or motivational method results from experiences and interaction with our lifetime environment. An environment where learning or motivation is not important will affect the student as they progress through school. As explained on the *Funderstanding* (2010) Web site, learning styles theory is based on research demonstrating that, as the result of heredity, upbringing, and current environmental demands, different individuals have a tendency to both perceive and organise information differently. (http://www.funderstanding.com/v2/educators/learning-styles-3/)

If our learning style and motivational method is a result of our environment then teachers could be in a position to positively influence the learner in the beliefs that they hold. That is, the classroom environment would be such that it differs considerably from the home environment where no support is offered nor any positive motivation provided. Recognition by quality teachers that early school leavers have any or all of a number of problems, such as negative home life and negative school experiences, would enable them to review and refine teaching methods and structures to allow potential early school leavers to change their own personal goals and expectations.

In all academic classrooms, no matter what the subject matter, there will be students with multiple learning styles. An effective means of accommodating these learning styles is for teachers to change their own styles and strategies and provide a variety of activities to meet the needs of different learning styles (Zhenhui, 2001, p. 5)

The example of the primary school Principal mentioned above is one such way of being a positive influence. Many teachers would remember a move in most schools once to introduce stickers and smiley faces on material as it was handed back after correction. Placing stickers or stamps on work is, from the perspective of students, a passive activity—students soon became uninterested in such attempts to motivate them. There is some difference between stickers as an award and a Principal's award as it was implemented at the school I mention. Students themselves could be involved in the nomination of winners in the latter award. Richard Ryan and Edward Deci say that, "When intrinsically motivated a person is moved to act for the fun or challenge entailed rather than because of external prods, pressures, or rewards" (p. 56).

Barbara McCombs (1993) cites previous studies and argues that learners of all ages are naturally quite adept at being self-motivated and at directing and managing their own learning on tasks they perceive as interesting, fun, personally meaningful or relevant in some way. The importance of McCombs' work lies in the fact that learners are not born with a set intelligence or a way of learning. The way of learning we adopt, or a belief in how intelligent we might be, is formed through our experiences and interaction with the environment at home or at school. For many teachers, the training they received was based on an underlying philosophy that suggested curative reprimand and/or external reward could motivate students to engage in learning. That is, the 'carrot or stick' method of motivation, an approach that can lead to either a student being disaffected or disengaged, perhaps even a combination of the two.

According to Smith et al. (2005), in their review of student learning and motivation, "A disaffected pupil is one who no longer sees any purpose in school or

learning. Such pupils may feel that they have learned all that they need to learn and/or they may feel that the material that the school offers to them for learning is irrelevant to their needs. As such, they simply "play out time" until they are able to leave school" (p. 4).

Later on in their work, Smith et al. expand the concept of "playing out time" and how this can lead to behavioural problems or students 'pretending' to be engaged.

> Some of these pupils may display behavioural difficulties in classes that they see as particularly irrelevant. Others may not show behavioural difficulties. Indeed, these pupils may even appear to be engaged with the learning process but this is simply an alternative tactic in 'playing out time'. Such participation is likely to be minimal; that is, enough to please the teacher and keep people 'off his/her back.' (p. 4)

This concept would be supported by the ELSS responses from 19.4 per cent of students who believed that education was little or of no importance to them. Forty one per cent of the ELSS respondents were biding time until they could leave or get a job. Smith et al. go on to say that

> A *disengaged pupil* is one who has lost connection with the learning process. Such pupils may well see the point to learning, value their education and, indeed, be motivated to learn. However, they may have, for example, an emotional problem that is acting as a barrier to learning. In this case, were the emotional difficulty to be alleviated, they would be likely to re-engage with learning. (p.8)

Again, from the ELSS, 9 per cent of responses indicated that while they may not have been doing very well at school they were trying to do as well as they could.

What then are the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that impinge on or influence a student's motivation? Intrinsic motivational factors are those a student will engage in without the need for reward. The reward comes from the enjoyment of doing or completing the activity. One way of 'encouraging' this involvement without making it an extrinsic motivator is to teach students how to set personal goals that are both attainable and meaningful. We should not set the goals for them but allow them to experiment with the concept of 'goal-setting' until they realise the steps involved if the goals are to meet the two criteria mentioned above. We need to be able to allow the students to dream and fantasise about their future. When we, their parents or society, take away that right we risk the students becoming de-motivated. By all means we need to be realistic but we ought not to stop them before they begin. Allan, one of the young people from the early school leavers discussion group, said he wanted to leave school since he was in year 8 because of the sports teacher. *"I liked basketball but dad would not let me play as "it is a girl's sport." I wanted to try to play basketball for the school but was stopped by my father. The sports teacher would often ask me to play, but when I replied that I was not allowed the teacher would not believe me and went on to make it very difficult for me while I was at school."* Later, after he left school Allan got to play basketball but this is just one example of a way to de-motivate a young person from gaining any sense of belonging to the school.

Further intrinsic motivation comes from allowing the students, again with guidance, a say in their subject selection and the rules of the school. We need to make

clear the cause-and-effect relationships between what students are doing and things that happen in real life. A curriculum, which stimulates curiosity about nature, the environment and the student's future, will be one that might very well appeal to and stimulate the cognitive nature of a child through his or her mental processes of perception, memory, judgment, and reasoning as well as to his or her sensory nature through emotional and volitional processes?

Extrinsic motivation factors are forms of positive reward that students value. Those students who appear affected by extrinsic reward may be affected by intrinsic motivations as well. Not all students are reward motivated. Some may place no value on the reward being offered and want to complete work because they like it more than they want the reward. The problem with extrinsic motivation is that once the reward is removed so might be the motivation. If students are led to believe there is a reward waiting at the end of all work and suddenly the rewards are not there, de-motivation occurs. This can occur for example, if a teacher takes too long to mark work or to hand back assignments.

Four students in the ELSS responses said they did not like the teacher because work was not handed back or they did not receive any feedback. This number is small but other students may not have ranked it as a high de-motivator as these four students did.

As educators and members of society, we ought to be interested in what de-motivates students. We see disaffection and deciding to disengage from school patterning the lives of a disquietingly high number of school students. It would be helpful in this regard to examine possible relationships between classroom level actions and pupils' motivation. ELSS responses listed over sixty-one negative responses about

teachers and their actions and responses in class to deter positive relationships with students. Fifty-three students said their teacher yelled at them, thirty-seven said their teacher got angry, thirty-eight said the teacher was sarcastic. These factors, together with fifty-eight others factors were considered by students to be de-motivators. This list of negative characteristics does not include what occurs outside of the classroom in student-teacher relationships, or responses to factors like school rules. Nor does it include family and home de-motivating factors.

There is evidence that how motivated or de-motivated individuals feel affects their levels of engagement with a task, enjoyment of activities, how and what they learn and ultimately their performance. Given that de-motivation can lead to disaffection with, and even disengagement from, learning, what pupils themselves have to say about their motivation to learn or not is an important prerequisite for informing teaching practices in the classroom (Smith et al., 2005).

My inquiry adds evidence and explanation to Smith et al.'s concerns to inform teaching practices in the class. But we need more help to understand, to deeply comprehend, and act upon, the effect that students' disaffection, their sense of being alienated from affection, sympathy or support, their becoming discontented and disloyal for want of affection or good will, and their experience of unfriendliness toward them and dislike of them has for the well-being of generations of people alive now and those to come.

In their blueprint for improving education and training, the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) states that "There is a range of issues, which impact on the effective and successful transition of a student through school and from school to

further education, training and employment" (Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 2007, p. 102). This report goes on to stress that students, in order to meet the employability skills, need to know how to establish goals and personal pathway plans for their future and meet the eight employability skills of communication, teamwork, problem-solving, initiative, enterprise planning and organising, self-management, learning and technology (p. 180).

Many of those involved in the personal interviews I undertook mentioned that either they just wanted to leave or were told to leave school. There were no set plans, nor did they have a transition program set in place for them. They left and went on unemployment benefits until they could find a job. The education system within Tasmania has begun to address this problem by requiring all schools to offer an organised structure of assistance for students to develop a personal pathway plan. For some students, this begins in year 8, other schools have begun these courses in year 7. The course is not a pass/fail course and is structured to provide skills and insight into transition from secondary or senior secondary education to either the workforce or further education.

> From 2007, all Tasmanian schools have been required to make sure that year 10 students develop a pathway plan and register it with us by the end of the year. A student's plan will include their career goals and the education and training they need to reach these goals. (Tasmanian Qualification Authority, 2010, p. 1)

I was able to learn how few young people actually had an idea of setting short or long-term goals. In one of the group sessions, the general response was that, as street kids, they do not worry about future goals, they just saw what was occurring that day or

week and responded to it. The group of street kids said they would look forward to seeing other friends, but had no idea where they would be in five or ten years' time. One member of the street kid group, Alison, just wanted to be with her boyfriend and have a baby so she could get a state government house to live in. The same group, when asked, said they did not even worry about where they would sleep that night until it got dark. At this point each day, they would start asking likely persons or visit places they had slept previously. Joanne, another member of this group, but only 16 years old, stated she had slept at five different locations in the last eight days. She said she was scared to sleep on the street or in the park if she was by herself. She went on to say she sometimes waited outside a local hotel and often got invited to some man's house for the night. Another member, Tom, said he usually found a building site or school yard in which to spend the night. He said he felt safer, especially if anyone came, as he had a number of different exits to get away.

At the time of my research a lack of goal-setting or future pathways was not a problem solely for those who leave school early. As a careers advisor I had year 12 students coming to me at the end of their graduation saying they had no idea what to do now school had finished. In ELSS One a question about who they would discuss future education or employment plans with, 37.2 per cent of those surveyed answered, "friends." Though pleased to confirm the importance of friends in their lives, I was concerned they would miss the expertise of empathetic educational advisers to help them choose possible futures. In my discussions with the three groups I felt, but did not say of course, that these young people were holding unrealistic views of the future.

Authorities that represent government respond to research statics, analyses, reports and recommendations with their own kinds of motivations that we might realistically attribute to political and economic imperatives. They continue as they attempt to manage our future.

Young people who are ‘at risk’ need to be offered special career guidance and personal support to help them move successfully through their twelve years of education and training and into the workforce (Department of Education and Training, 2004, p. 15). As mentioned earlier, the Tasmanian Education Department has implemented a strategic plan for assisting students in planning their futures. Other states of Australia are offering similar courses. The program offered in Tasmania is not a pass/fail course but a means by which young people can develop a realistic understanding of what is involved in seeking future employment or education and where they can gain advice. To assist with pathway planning in Tasmania, the government had established an additional resource in the high schools in the form of a pathway planning officer. Those in this position would meet at least three times a year with each year 8, 9 and 10 student. The aim was to build strong relationships that will allow for an honest and open approach to an examination of the student’s skills, strengths and attributes as well as their aspirations and possible career path opportunities. This was then to be supported by an integrated curriculum that embraces a career/vocation focus. This course began trials in 2005, since then the funding for the program has ceased and it is now up to individual schools to continue with the program.

A question, which arises from the implementation of this program, is “where do the planning officers gain their expertise?” Many teachers have gone straight from school

to university (or other training institute), and then back to school. They have either little or no other experience of work life. Some schools are offering teachers an opportunity for industry experiences. At the end of the year staff may take up the option of visiting industry groups or working in an industry for a few days. A dual campus senior secondary college in Hobart, thanks to an initiative of their principal and the careers teachers, has been organising professional development in this area for a number of years. Other schools may be doing likewise. However, what is happening on a national scale and what is occurring in the planned Australian National Curriculum in regards to pathway planning for students are continuing projects.

The Australian Commonwealth Government through the Department of Education and Training offers schools in the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory course support and information for pathway planning in careers. The career web site also offers all Australian students information on career planning. The Australian National Curriculum lists the objectives for each of the various stages of education through to the end of year 12, although concentrating more on years 1 to 10. While there does not appear to be a direct statement about pathway planning for future careers, statements appear concerning similar programs for high school students. "Flexibility is important because it allows schools to provide learning pathways that extend the learning entitlement and ensure all students are fully engaged and prepared to continue learning into the senior secondary years" (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2010, p. 13).

Public advocacy for pathway planning for students offers an opportunity to strengthen and deepen understanding and active support for strategies like those above.

We can extend instructive, informative and explanatory guidelines to parents or guardians and concerned members of business and community, and engage them in discussion. When trying to help establish a small program for students “at risk” in one of the schools within the suburban area of my research, I was faced with a lot of negative responses from parents and a lack of interest. I personally approached twenty-eight parents or guardians and was met with anger because I thought their child might need assistance, even though I believe I was very careful about presenting my questions and suggestions with sensitivity and in a very positive manner. Some parents showed complete lack of interest. They did not appear to care what their child was doing. Attendance at two parent information evenings was very poor. From twenty eight invitations sent, only four parents and one grandmother attended to listen to the benefits of a personal program aimed at providing each student with a range of educational topics to assist him or her to catch up on material they have missed or not learned in previous years.

Harry’s story is poignant, a single story of lack of parental interest in a child's education but by no means the only one I heard. Harry was a member of the street kids group. He was the eldest of four and had previously lived with his mother, who was living on a single mother’s benefit from the Commonwealth Government. Two of Harry’s siblings had the same father as him but the last child in the family was a result of Harry's mother having a weekend out with some sailors from a foreign warship that had visited some eight years earlier. “*My father had left the family very early and moved to Queensland with another woman and the family had not heard from him. My mother did not care what I did. She only wanted me to stay at school so I could get a government allowance for students from low income families. When I was in trouble, or had a request*

from the school for a parent-teacher interview, my mother had never attended. I gradually got fed up with teacher comments and the school got fed up with my mother's lack of interest. The school was pleased I had left and my mother kicked me out because I no longer had the government income. My mother only wanted me for the government money. I have had no contact with my mother in the past eighteen months but had seen my brother and sister at the local bus mall."

From my own 'trained' perspective, I could see that members within the three discussion groups did not really understand what short and long-term goal-setting meant. Realistic goal-setting was clouded by their own perceived expectations of their future lifestyles and limited expectation of other possible lifestyles. Discussions around where they would like to live, what they would like to have and what they would do in the future, indicated a lack of understanding of income earning potential and their own health and wellbeing. When asked, Camille, a member of the second group, said she wanted to be a hairdresser and was going to open her own salon. She said she would travel while the salon made money for her. Camille was only one of many who had no concept about what was involved in obtaining a job or running a business and were unable to talk about how that kind of future might realistically come into being for them. For most a career was something that would bring in thousands of dollars without thinking about the educational level or attainment they would first need to achieve.

Many members of the street kid group had little understanding of the purchasing power of their government allowances as it more than met their current needs. At the same time, they had little or no understanding of future costs associated with owning or, maintaining assets. As part of the rapport established between myself and the group of

street kids, I began to realise that while they were willing to share their stories they lacked certain skills so I assisted them with job applications and some basic financial mathematics. We considered loans, credit cards, mortgages and mobile phone costs. As these "classes" developed, the students began to recognize what costs were involved. They admitted they felt disbelief at first and thought I was trying to make it difficult for them. They came to realise how much their wants and dreams would cost and what skills they might require to increase their earning capacity. I also spoke with them about quality of life, and the many lifestyle options they could take up, as I did not want to focus on money and income. The main aim of these 'lessons' was to help them learn how to budget and obtain affordable accommodation. Janice, a member of the group, said she and two friends now had a better idea and they were going to share their resources and rent a place to live in. This led to discussions about rent bonds and responsibilities and rights of the tenant. I then sat down with the three girls and spoke about holding parties, any damage that may be caused, how to budget for food, clothes, electricity and other householder costs. After some weeks, the three girls were able to have a better understanding of costs involved and the last I heard from them they had moved into a three-bedroom apartment on top of a local shop.

Because these young people had left the education system in Tasmania early, they have not had the opportunity of undertaking personal pathway planning. There are other initiatives that were introduced by the Tasmanian Government, at about the same time, and with them, benefits, that young people like these street kids could miss too. Recently the Government employed Youth Learning Officers (YLO) and Vocational Education and Learning Development Officers (VELDO) to create a safety network for students

who have been identified as being at risk of becoming disengaged from education, or who have already become disengaged. VELDOs provide advice to students on how to gain the most from all initiatives in the curriculum. As well, hopefully, they are to encourage and motivate students to stay at school and prosper. In balance, school-based VELDOs create professional development opportunities for both classroom teacher and year level teachers to learn to successfully integrate the material provided within the current structure. The VELDOs run public forums for parents and the wider community.

My question remains though. Why do we as educators continue to misapprehend that some students continue year after year to miss the benefits of the kinds of researched projects and initiatives that come into schools year after year? We may state our alarm at the number of students who leave school early. We may make judgements and state why we think they leave. In what ways might we come to apprehend deeply that the patterns of behaving and disengaging, patterns of fear and alienation, that begin to be drawn in their lives from early years motivate young people to choose different lifestyles out of school, where they can hope to find friendship, belonging, and empathy even in the meekest of shelters.

One way, I have come to a sense of knowing is from my experience of placing myself amongst the early school leavers, confronting and bracketing my personal biases and endeavouring to engage in respectful dialogue with them in their own places during their own times. There are occasions, I have come to believe, when a teacher needs to address the imperative of his vocation outside school, and that the circumstances of his employment ought to permit inside and outside school teaching.

Chapter Eight

Patterns of employment and problems of becoming responsible, independent adults

The longitudinal research completed by Lyn Robinson, Mike Long and Lamb for the Foundation for Young Australians since 2008 has been able to look at the employment and education situation of young Australians. The Foundation has been gathering research information for eighteen years. Among other important information, the 2011 research shows two significant long-term trends,..."the stability of working life for young people has steadily decreased"(p. 6) and Australia's economic prosperity is consistently not being passed on to many young people (Robinson, Long, & Lamb, 2011).

The same report has indicated that there is a high rate of teenage unemployment that is exacerbated by the lack of completion at year 12. Those who do complete year 12 are more likely to continue on to further education than those who leave school early. These are not the only concerns mentioned in the report as Robinson et al. state, "Young people with low levels of attainment— especially those from rural and remote areas, those with a disability and those from low S.E.S. backgrounds— are also at risk of marginalisation in the labour force" (p. 12).

Alison Anlezark and Patrick Lim (2011), using the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the 2003 Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth, found that the number of young people combining school and part-time work has increased. The percentage increase varied between 30 per cent and 60 per cent depending on the source they used (Anlezark

& Lim, 2011). Anlezark and Lim also acknowledged that the differences in percentage increase may be attributed to the definition of work used by the respondents and the structure of the survey samples.

Nicholas Biddle (2007) found that changes to the structure of the Australian demand for labour in the early 2000s has led to an increase in the availability of part-time work, especially in retail and hospitality industries (Biddle, 2007). Cathy Howieson, Jim McKechnie and Sheila Semple (2006) wrote that the flexibility of the hours of work and the desire to gain some financial independence, rather than a pathway to a potential future career, has been part of the decision by many of these students to seek part-time work. (Howieson, McKechnie, & Semple, 2006)

The demand for flexible workers and the perceived flexible hours of senior students appears as to be a perfect match between demand and supply of labour. Flexible study hours, whether real or perceived, and the hours worked by full-time students has led to discussion on the positive or negative nature of part-time work. Australian and International studies (Vickers, Lamb and Hinkley 2003; Howieson, McKechnie and Semple 2006; Xiaodong Gong, Rebecca Cassells and Alan Duncan 2012) found that the more hours a student works the greater the negative impact on school success. On the other hand, some studies (Wendy Patton and Erica Smith 2009; Herbert Marsh and Sabina Kleitman 2005) found that some part-time work has a positive outcome for students as it assists in the transition to work, financial independence and character building.

Using data from the 1998, 2003 and 2008 Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) Gong, Cassells and Duncan (2012) found that young people at school or university are making constant decisions over the balance of work and study. These

decisions are often made when taking into account previous choices between work and study.

> On the one hand, working in year 9 may affect students' outcomes and confidence in the school environment, which in turn may influence effort and future achievements in school. On the other hand, more income from working and the potential to derive future returns from current labour market experience may motivate students to work longer hours. (p. 9)

Gong, et al. based their research paper on three different groups of students, those who studied and did not work, those who studied and did less than 15 hours at work per week and those who studied but spent more than 15 hours per week at work. They took into account the school environment, family background and individual characteristics when designing their model.

The challenge is to discover at what point part-time work stops being a positive benefit for students and becomes a negative factor in relation to study and school completion. There have been a number of research papers written on this topic (Gong, et al., 2012, Vickers, et al., 2003, Marsh and Kleitman, 2005 and Patton and Smith, 2009), each with a different aspect of research. The Australian House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training in 2009 agreed that less than 15 hours per week at work could be manageable for students at school, their capacity to manage work and study would vary from student to student. The House of Representatives report titled *Adolescent Overload?* (2009) found from their national forums that most students suggested that 12 to 15 hours of work per school week was probably the maximum before

their part-time work impacted on their school work (Australian House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training, 2009).

For some students, extra hours of work may mean missing extra-curricular activities or not seeing friends. For others, it may be that undertaking extra hours of work is a result of their dissatisfaction with or alienation from school, peers, teachers and the subjects. The desire to disengage from school might be the reason they choose to increase the number of hours they work, rather than the reverse.

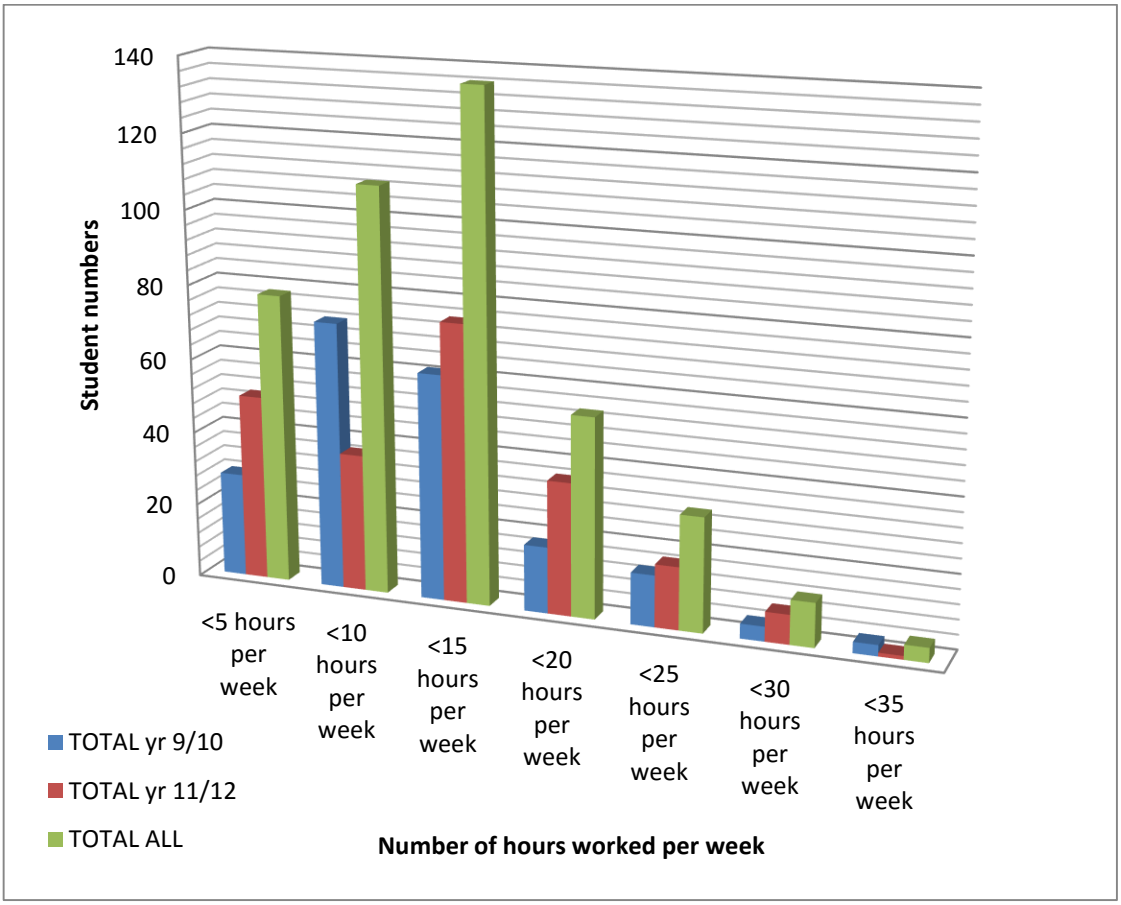
The Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (1998, 2003, 2008 and 2011) take into account the work and study combination of year 9 students and then compares this with their results from year 10, year 11 and year 12. In the LSAY (1998). It was found that the number of students not doing any paid work was 77 per cent, but by the time these students reached year 12 (2001) approximately 45 per cent of students fell into this category while those combining part-time work with full-time study had increased from 20 per cent to approximately 47 per cent (LSAY, 2011).

Being a student and an employed worker

During my inquiry I sought out some patterns of employment that students were choosing and then engaged with them in dialogue and discussion about their reasons for joining the workforce early.

The following is a graph of responses obtained from my initial survey. The data obtained from ELSS One are compared with the data from ELSS Two and Three.

Graph 18 Number of hours of part-time work full-time students said they were currently undertaking



The following two tables are the results of the same questions to the two follow-up surveys. Students who were in year 10 in the initial survey when they reached year 12 and the students who were in year 9 in the initial survey when they had reached year 12 completed these surveys.

Table 4 Participation in part-time work stated by ELSS Two

	School A	**School B**	**TOTAL**	%
Do you work part-time?				
Yes	47	48	95	58%
No	34	36	70	42%

Table 5 Participation in part-time work stated by ELSS Three

Do you work part-time?	**School A**	**School B**	**TOTAL**	
Yes	17	19	36	73%
No	6	7	13	27%

Although the numbers of student responses to do with number of hours worked in my latter two surveys are small, there has been an increase in the number of students who are now working part-time while full-time students. The same two surveys indicate there has been a decrease in the number of hours worked and this may reflect the job market for part-time workers. Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics indicated that the percentage of school students aged 15 or higher who are working part-time has increased from 26 per cent in 1990 to 34 per cent in 2000. From the current statistics there has been an increase from 203,000 full-time secondary school students working part-time in 1990 to 408,000 full-time secondary school students working part-time in 2013. At the same time there are 640, 600 full-time secondary school students who are not in the labour force (ABS, 2013).

According to the potential early school leavers in my surveys and face-to-face interviews, those who were working part-time could not find full time work, their school courses were not flexible to cater for them as part-time students, and they firmly believed that the income they were earning was more important than any future earnings they would take based on a completed year 12 course.

There appears to be a pattern in the number of hours worked and year 12 completion rates, particularly for boys. For example, in a study completed in Victoria, year 9 boys who work more than 15 hours per week are 22 per cent less likely to finish high school than those who do not but strangely, the same does not apply to girls (Vickers, Lamb, & Hinkley, 2003)

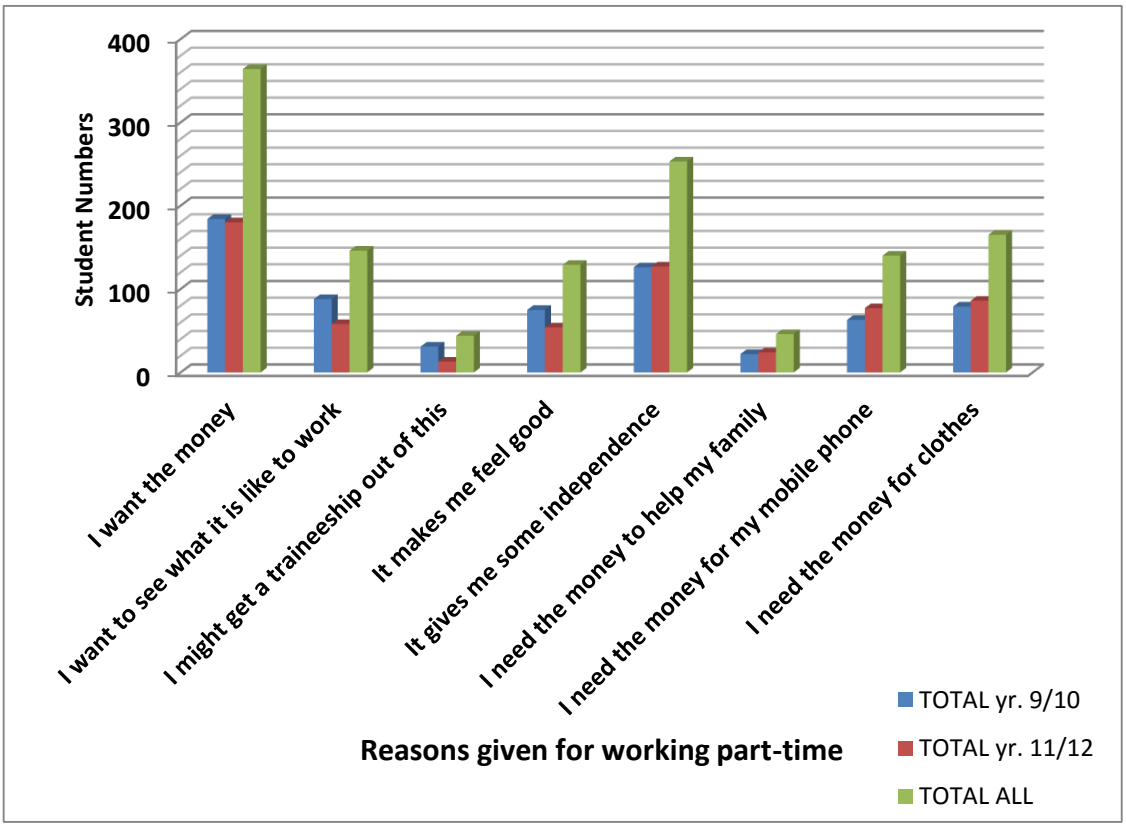
Vickers, Lamb and Hinkley (2003) report their research shows that for high school students who are not scholastically inclined there are numerous benefits to working part-time. For those who have already decided against tertiary study, working part-time can actually increase the odds of gaining an apprenticeship by 65 per cent, and full-time employment by 46 per cent.

> For many young people today technology is their preferred means of communication. Texting, Facebook, mobile phone usage, tablets and smartphones are more common than twenty years ago. For example, mobile phone usage climbed from 6.7 million people to 9.6 million in one year (ABS, 2012). Eighty four per cent of mobile phones are smartphones and 818,500 children aged 5 to 14 years (29%) had a mobile phone and 91per cent of 14 to 24 year olds owned and used a mobile phone. (Australian Communications and Media Authority, 2013)

Maintaining a mobile phone account and the social and communication benefits of owning a mobile phone figures solidly in my graph below of the reasons students who

took part in ELSS One gave for working part-time. In today's world, young people want money and independence above all.

Graph 19 A graphical representation of reasons for working part-time



Matters of stress or desire: young people's work, study and futures

In discussions with the three groups, the participants gave a number of reasons why they worked part-time and the outcomes for them of combining both school and work. Many of the students I spoke with did not really want to leave school.

Maria, from the local early leavers discussion group, said that she had worked part-time for most of her secondary schooling. *"I had undertaken part-time work while a full-time*

student because it started out as a way of saving money for special events such as concerts. It later became important to have new clothes and to pay for my mobile phone. By the end of year 11, I was almost working full-time even though I was hired on a part-time basis. Because of the money I was earning I left school early but now as I get older my employer gives me less hours of work. My recommendation to other young people is to wait until you finished school before doing so many hours."

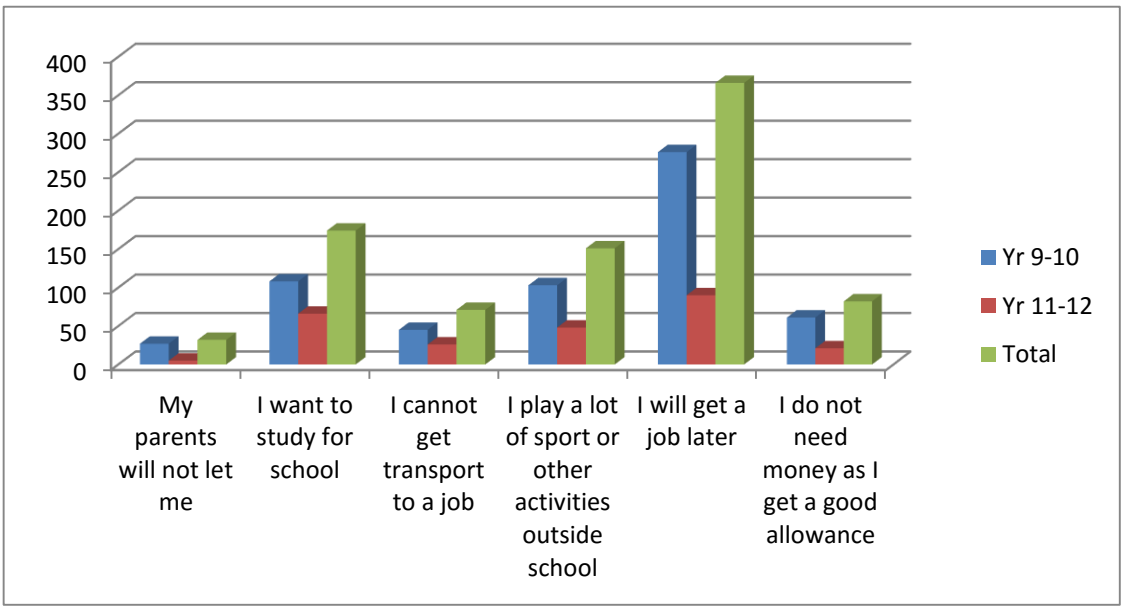
Another girl from the same group said she had wanted to finish school but her parents would only pay for her up until the end of year 10. Kaye said the school did not know but she was working 35 hours per week and still trying to be a full-time student. Eventually the lack of sleep, the inability to keep up with the pressure of both work and school led to Kaye's decision to leave school early.

While making the move to part-time work many students at first only see the benefits but not the costs of making this decision. Peter, also from the local early leavers group, said *"I had begun part-time work to pay for concerts and downloads, then as I did more hours I found that I had less time to socialise with my friends and less time to put into my studies. My academic reports had been good until about the middle of year 11. In hindsight, I can see that this was about the time I gave up football to do more part-time work. I now realise that I also gave up a lot of my study time about the same time. It was funny to think that when I had more money I had less time to do things but my friends had less money but more time together."*

Of the students who took part in the ELSS there were a number who said they did not work at all and were full-time students. Graph 21 affirms their preference to be in school at this time of their lives, for school to come first before working later in

professions, seeing benefit from study and participation in sport and recreation, and having parental support.

Graph 20 Response from full-time students who are not in any employment

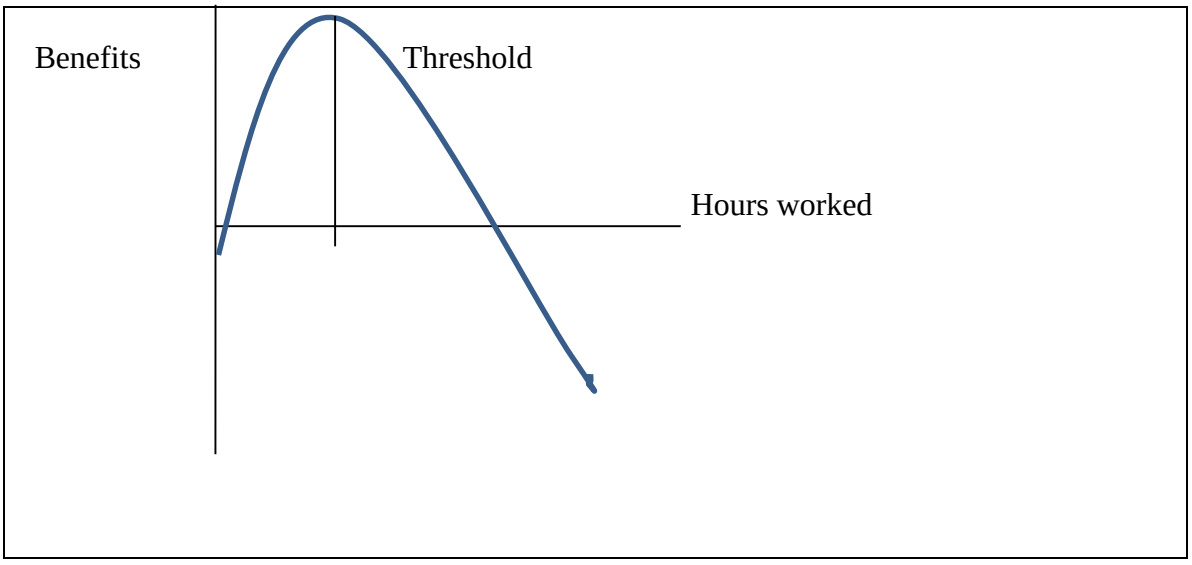


Patton and Smith (2009), in their research, looked at the impact of part-time work on educational outcomes. They found that there might be some positive benefits to working part-time while a full-time student, such as some sense of independence, financial benefits, an understanding of consumerism, an understanding of taxation and how finances work. Part-time work may also lead to an offer of full-time work or a traineeship, which could benefit some full-time students.

A student's decision to leave school before the end of year 12 in order to gain a career may be seen as a positive outcome, but because it is recorded as yet another early school leaver, some might perceive it negatively. Reasons for undertaking part-time work listed in Graph 18 (p. 198 above) include desire for independence and for seeing what work is like. Comparison between benefits of part-time work and gains in a student's educational outcomes is certainly difficult to ascertain using survey data.

Marsh and Kleitman (2005) looked at what students may do with new found financial independence and whether there is a threshold where negative costs outweigh positive benefits. They also suggest that how young people spend their income is important as access to money can lead to an increase in alcohol abuse and drug taking (p. 337). They studied four models that may measure the benefits and costs of part-time work on the educational outcomes of full-time students. One of particular interest to my study was based on a threshold (note the inverted "U") where increased working hours for full-time students led to negative effects on schooling. They reported there was little evidence from their findings to support this model (p. 349).

Graph 21 My interpretation of Marsh and Kleitman's model



Cost of part-time work

If there is an optimum, or as Marsh and Kleitman (2005) suggested an inverted "U" shaped curve of benefits and costs what is the threshold amount of hours when the curve begins its downward swing?

Vickers, Lamb and Hinkley (2003) suggested that working more than 5 hours per week in year 9 would affect the student's decision to complete year 12. An earlier work by Robinson (1999) found that working more than 10 hours per week in year 11 affected year 12 completion. Marsh and Kleitman (2005), working in the United States of America, found 20 hours per week to be the threshold when positive outcomes swings to sacrifice. Jeremy Staff and Jeylan Mortimer (2007) suggest that it is not the hours of work per week but the intensity and duration of the work undertaken by students. They found that combining study and work could actually benefit school outcomes.

Anlezark and Lim (2011) suggested that the character of those students who work part-time should be examined on an individual basis. There are those who may find part-time work beneficial and therefore the school should encourage those students who are not engaged at school to consider a combination of work and study leading to employment. "…the advantages and disadvantages of combining school and work are not clear-cut. Some young people are better able to manage the competing demands of combining school and work (Anlezark & Lim, 2011, p. 7).

Anlezark and Lim (2011) used their research to arrive at a set of circumstances that characterise students who study and work part-time. They based their characterisation on their analysis of research completed by Biddle (2007), Howieson et

al. (2006), Vickers et al. (2003) and Lyn Robinson (1999). Their characteristics included socio-economic status, locality, school type, post-school plans, receipt of youth allowance from the government, intention to complete year 12 (asked at age 15) and academic ability at age 15. (p. 11)

Anlezark and Lim (2011) further explored the impact of different working hours on school retention and the effect of part-time work on a student's Tertiary Entrance Ranking (TER) score. They go on to report that their research does not take into consideration other hours of commitment a student may have, such as sport, cultural or social.

> Overall, combining school and work has a modest impact on school performance for those working more than 5 hours per week. Generally, this effect is more pronounced when hours are longer (in excess of 15 hours a week) for both males and females. The impact of the effect appears stronger for males. (p. 24)

From ELSS One, 45 per cent of students said they work part-time. Approximately 24 per cent of these said they worked 20 hours per week or more. In these part-time roles, they are expected to be, and are treated as, young adults. Many are given seriously responsible positions, as department managers or shift managers, for example. The education system expects them back at school in the day time. At school, they are "children," and have no say, or a limited say, in what they would like to study or what they should study. Schools can often forget the adult aspect of students' lives. Often a student may not reveal this employment information, and teachers wonder why they may be late for school or get tired in the afternoon. Sometimes teachers label these students as "lazy," and yet forget or do not know that the students may be at school from 8:30 a.m. to

3:30 p.m., then be at work by 5 p.m. or 6 p.m. and work through until 1 a.m. In the schools that I visited, or taught in, within the northern suburbs of Hobart there was no consideration of any out-of-school learning if it had not been certified by the state education authority.

> The subjects of these education policies are 'students' – subjects who are defined through their status within educational institutions...This has the effect of limiting the perspective on young people to that of their role in formal learning (excluding all other forms of learning) and positioning them as the recipients of knowledge (rather than as co-participants). This approach explicitly omits the out-of-school learning experiences that young people have, especially in workplaces, and it promotes a deficit approach to young people. (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2010, p. 17)

A further reason given for leaving school early, and the largest in the student ELSS One responses, was the desire to get a job. Of those surveyed, who indicated they would leave school early, 47 per cent said they wanted a job. A further 2 per cent said they had to leave school in order to look after a sibling or a sick family member and would try to get a Commonwealth carer's allowance. Another 5 per cent said they wanted to be with their boyfriend or girlfriend.

When the desire to get a job was raised with the discussion groups the underlying belief was that at the end of year 12 they would be competing with everyone for any positions that become available. If they left early, they may get a head start in searching for jobs. They indicated that they did not have confidence in their academic achievements matching up against others if they waited until the end of the year. Some

members of the volunteer group, who were in traineeships, said they left school early in order to try to get on-the-job training positions rather than wait. The group said that not all employers wanted to wait until the end of the year to advertise. Grabbing at any opportunity was better than waiting at school, especially while you were bored with the school work. A member of the group, Kevin, said he had left school to help his mother financially. *"Because my father had a gambling problem I wanted to get some money so my mother could give the other kids in my family a better opportunity. I left school and undertook an apprenticeship. I helped my mother financially until I was 21 years of age, at this point I could not continue to assist and left home to establish my own family."* Like Kevin, Paul said he left school to try to help his family too but had not been able to get a job. He looked after his younger brothers and sisters so that his mum could work more hours in her job. In the discussion groups, we discussed the idea of developing individual income earning potential. Most of those in the group felt they could gain experience, which would give them a better chance of advancement in any of the positions they held.

Circumstances of health and concerns for well-being

The ELSS results indicated that 9 per cent of year 9 to year 12 students would most likely leave school due to health problems. When this point was raised with the three discussion group members, "health problems" for them meant pregnancy, drugs and alcohol problems, depression and car and motorbike accidents.

Esler et al.'s and te Riele and Wyn's evidence is alarming as it anticipates the conditions in which many students leave school early, legally as soon as they can, or

illegally if they must abscond, to feed or survive their habits. "The proportion of Tasmanian secondary students at risk of short-term harm from excessive alcohol consumption has increased over the last 20 years for students aged 12 to 15 years, but has remained relatively unchanged for older students aged 16 to 17 years" (Esler et al., 2002, p. 93)

According to Esler et al. 23 per cent of 12 to 15 year old student who drink will be at harm while 45 per cent of 16 to 17 year old students who drink may also be at harm. Considering the legal age of alcohol consumption is 18 years of age this would indicate that students as young as 12 years of age have access to alcohol and have been supplied by someone older or obtain the alcohol illegally.

The same source also indicates that Tasmania has a higher proportion, than any other state or territory in Australia, of young people aged 18 to 24 years who drink at such levels as to cause short-term harm.

The June 2006 report to the Australian Government, states that by the age of 14, around 86 per cent of students had tried alcohol and by the age of 17, 70 per cent of students had consumed alcohol in the months prior to the survey. The report further states that 10 per cent of 12 year olds and 49 per cent of 17 year olds were consuming alcohol in the week prior to the survey (White & Hayman, 2006, p. 41).

te Riele and Wyn (2005) state that while the consumption of alcohol is a growing problem, cannabis is still the highest ranking illicit substance among secondary students. Nearly 3 out of 10 secondary students have used cannabis at some time. The use of cannabis increases with age, for example, 5 per cent of students aged 12 and up to 32 per cent of 17 year olds have used cannabis. 7 per cent of all students had used cannabis in

the months prior to te Riele and Wyn's survey and 4 per cent within the week before the survey.

When I raised the topic of drugs and alcohol with the group of street kids they all agreed that they had taken, in some form, cannabis, ecstasy, analgesics, tranquillisers, tobacco, alcohol and inhalants. Brad, one of the group, said that he had begun using drugs early in secondary school and had gradually switched to supplying drugs to other students. *"I was caught in year 9 and made to move to another school. In year 10, I was caught again and got "kicked out." When I left the school I lost my market as some other young person had taken my place selling drugs to the students. I found this difficult and got into a lot of fights with other sellers in the suburb who were no longer at school as they thought I was trying to pinch their street customers. I only use cannabis, tobacco and alcohol now."*

Suzy, another member of the same group, said her parents were wealthy and had spoiled her as she grew up. *"I began to use their money to buy drugs until I was often caught "stoned" by the teachers or the police. My parents became fed up with my behaviour and kicked me out of the house. Now I am just hanging about the streets with friends and occasionally giving sexual favours in return for drugs. I have been trying not to use them. It gets me through the rough days."*

The volunteer group had similar experiences and could often relate, with some detail, the same events to those of their peers, who were removed from school or were "kicked out." Though members of this group said they were no longer regularly using drugs, they told me about the availability and ease of access to alcohol and cannabis when they were still at school. They said there was always some student who could get

what you wanted and agreed that there were at least three public places in Hobart where you could get cannabis very easily for “about $A30.” Two members mentioned that some students regularly drink alcohol at school. They would take their drinking bottles into toilet cubicles so they would not get caught.

The group of current students said they knew of some kids who had access to cannabis but were uncertain about other drugs. They did not see analgesics, tobacco or alcohol as being drugs because you could purchase these easily enough and they were legal. They associated the word “drug” with something which was illegal and attached to a sense of rebellion. I asked this group if they had ever attended organised lessons at school on the dangers of licit and illicit drugs. The general consensus was that unless you did health studies, or something similar, the only information you received was at a school assembly when the police came and put up a display or handed out pamphlets. Sometimes your home room teacher might take the time to explain about the dangers of drug use to the class.

All three groups agreed that the use of both licit and illicit drugs had caused some of their peers to either leave school or be asked to leave. From in-house gossip among students they believed if a user or seller left school then they had been “kicked out” (expelled) by the principal. When each group was asked if it was possible to estimate of how many of their peers had been affected by drugs or alcohol to the point where they left school the answers were so varied I could not derive reliable numbers. School principals, when asked, also could not give me reliable numbers, out of respect for privacy rights of students, but said between six and ten students per year left for those reasons without

counting those whose families had taken them out of school for substance abuse or those students who did not re-enrol and had not given a reason.

Another circumstantial health issue raised by students in the ELSS One was teen pregnancy. While there was no section for it in the ELSS it was listed as "other" in the reasons for leaving school by some students and was raised when discussing health reasons by those in the groups. In the 2007 Tasmanian Government Budget, one of the schools which took part in the ELSS was allocated $1.1 million over four years in order to support a young mothers' program The aim of this program was to assist teenage parents and their children and to encourage the young parents to remain in education or return to education after their confinement. The program also provided for parenting skills and health education. Maureen, one of the early school leavers discussion group members, told me in our confidential interview that she had become pregnant while at school. "*My parents were angry and kept telling me I had wasted my time at school and would spend the rest of my time on welfare. I did not want to marry the boy and I don't think he was interested in marriage anyway as he wanted to go to university. My parents relented after the baby was born and let me stay at home. The first year was good and bad, at first I was a novelty with my friends, but after a while they stopped dropping in to see me. I then found it hard because I had very little social life and some of the boys who asked me out only wanted to have sex, they thought I was be happy just to be used. Now my little man is two I have been able to go to TAFE and complete a certificate in childcare. I am hopeful this will lead to a job."*

In 1997 it was reported that 30 per cent of Tasmanian girls became pregnant between the ages of 15 and 19 (McKay, 1997, p. 4). A further report by Danielle McKay

(2009) on a paper presented at the 2009 Parenting in Early Years Conference by Professor Julie Quinlivan states that disadvantaged teen girls are more likely to turn their lives around if they have a baby. Quinlivan reported that teen mothers are more likely to quit smoking, go back to school and get a job. A personal example of this is Melitta, who has just had her second child, and contacted me on Facebook to say she is now enrolling in a registered nurse program.

The Tasmanian Department for Education produced a policy on supporting pregnant girls and parenting students in which it identifies the likelihood of early school leaving among school girls who become pregnant and who opt to keep their babies. The policy also discusses a range of other risk factors associated with teenage pregnancy, such as abuse, poverty and neglect (Tasmanian Department of Education, 2013).

The Education Department has also worked with Family Planning Tasmania to produce a publication, *Making Choices,* which indicates the range of assistance available to pregnant teenagers and parenting students. The information in this booklet is important and offers contact details for the three major areas of Tasmania together with the participation of school counsellors. The department does not give any statistics in this publication but suggests that some students do not remain at school, instead they attempt to complete their school via on-line learning. From the information provided in this publication it would appear that only one school in the state provides a young mothers' program (Tasmanian Department of Education and Family Planning Tasmania, 2008). During my research, I could not find any clear statement, or policy, on pregnant teenagers or parenting students remaining at school from the Independent or Catholic schools.

In my years of experience as a teacher I found a varied response to pregnant teenagers. In my early teaching years at a girl's school, any girl found to be pregnant usually stayed home, whether that was a school policy or a family decision is unknown. My wife and I, in some cases, would provide baby baskets and nappies to assist these young girls financially. In recent years, young people are more aware of sexuality, pregnancy prevention and long-term decision-making. For those students who have fallen pregnant while in year 11 or 12 there has been a raft of responses, education assistance and health advice and support provided by schools.

Engaging readers-teachers-researchers

Chapters Five to Eight have traversed issues that come into conflict in the lives of young people—parental direction and income, poverty, attitudes towards education, work and welfare, teachers' treatment of young people, teachers' response to them, subjects offered, and curriculum and timetable structure. As well, the chapters reveal social and behavioural patterns of young people as they confront these kinds of issues on the way to adulthood—patterns of behaving, patterns of disengaging, patterns of fear of success and failure, patterns of motivation and patterns of making life choices relating to employment, unemployment, health choices and becoming adults.

I trust in coming to the closure of this penultimate chapter that in chapters five to eight I describe and interpret the social action and behaviour of early school leavers in the particular contexts of their lifeworlds (Ponterotto, 2006, p. 543). Further, as Joseph Ponterotto defines

> Thick description accurately describes observed social actions and assigns purpose and intentionality to these actions, by way of the researcher's understanding and clear description of the context under which the social actions took place. Thick description captures the thoughts and feelings of participants as well as the often complex web of relationships among them. Thick description leads to thick interpretation, which in turns leads to thick meaning of the research findings for the researchers and participants themselves, and for the report's intended readership. Thick meaning of findings leads readers to a sense of verisimilitude, wherein they can cognitively and emotively "place" themselves within the research context (p. 543).

I strongly hope my thick descriptions capture the written and spoken thoughts and feelings of almost 2000 students and former students and the web of relationships that bind them to family, school and community. My thick description leads to the meaning I give to the research findings for researchers and participants themselves.

Chapter Nine

Converting tragic loss to principle and responsibility

That there is a group of young people in Tasmania that education is failing is a story that has to be told. It is a tragic story. A story told to me by young people, in a particular suburb of Hobart, who were leaving school early. I had hoped that a clearer understanding of what young people were struggling with and the daily influences impinging on their life decisions may assist teachers, parents, students and the education system to understand their struggle and to find ways to develop an infrastructure of support for early school leavers and teachers who face a daily battle to help the early leavers with their future plans. My own lived experience and more than thirty years of experience as a teacher led me to believe that given an opportunity to review their early decisions without pressure and with a different school structure early leavers would change their mind.

Often I witnessed amongst them deep regret at their decisions to leave school, and a regret that they could not see themselves fitting the pattern of behaviour and attendance required by the schools in their suburb. In particular, I remembered one of my former students, Kent, whom I had asked to leave because he was selling drugs at school, approaching me two or three years later. He told me that my discussions with him at the time had helped him to "*wake up to himself.*" He said that he had become involved with drugs because of the various pressures in his life and the drugs had allowed him to forget. He began to sell them to other students when the cost of his personal drugs became too much and he did not feel there was anyone in his life he could turn to for help. Because I had taken him to a youth counsellor and introduced him to this person, he realised there

were people who were interested in him as a person. He later attended TAFE and completed a certificate course.

I had begun to wonder if Kent had a significant person at school or someone he felt a link to, would it have been a different story? How many other stories had I missed from the early school leavers prior to my research? I had become concerned that I was not hearing these stories until the student was on the verge of leaving. It had become compelling for me to research the beliefs held by current year 9 to year 12 students and hear the stories of those who had left school prior to the end of year 12, or who were thinking about leaving early.

As my research progressed, I realised that there were multiple, complex and daunting reasons that could explain why young people might leave school early. I saw spreading out before me deeply compounding factors that students, teachers and systems must confront in the face of the kinds of barriers, boundaries and constraints that social, political, economic and cultural living in Tasmania set before us.

The ELSS One responses indicated to me some commonality in the lived experiences of these young people but also some surprises. For example, I had no prior understanding of the influence boyfriends or girlfriends had on their partners' decisions to leave school early, and yet my experience told me that the number of hours students were working affected school responses such as falling asleep in class, not finishing assignments or turning up late, responses that were affecting their ability to cope with remaining at school. I had always known that students could mimic the habits, and in some cases the voices, of their teachers. Yet the ability students had to 'read' a teacher and the degree and accuracy to which they were able to discern their ability to be a good

teacher or a bad teacher was a surprise as it revealed itself to me through the discussions and surveys. The amount of in-class assistance given by teachers was important to the students but they did not seem to see the large class sizes as a cause for not receiving their teachers' attention.

I had always shared with my colleagues that professional development would be a remedy for misunderstood pedagogy. Teachers need to develop strong positive relationships with students, teachers are not there to learn every intimate detail about the student or their family structure but to 'be there', that is, to act as a support, whether by deed, word or action. Teachers need to take an interest in students, students need teachers to take an interest in them. The 'best years at school' for the students I surveyed was usually when the system or teacher were present to them, when they were in the early primary classes, or in year 7 and entering secondary school. A lot of work has occurred on the transition between primary and secondary schooling. The pedagogical misunderstanding, I believe is that "we did it in year 7, there is no need to carry it on."

As Ricardo Sabates, Kwame Akyeampong, Jo Westbrook and Frances Hunt (2010) affirm,

> Despite its importance, strategies designed to improve primary school retention and progression have received relatively little attention. Typically, national education plans assume that primary school progression will improve automatically as a result of interventions designed to improve initial access and educational quality" (Sabates, Akyeampong, Westbrook, & Hunt, 2010, p. 2).

That students need teachers to take an interest in them is just as important in years 11 and 12 when retention is desired as it is in the transition stages when students are leaving primary school for secondary school.

Coming out of hiding

Whether or not teachers take an interest in them, it became a striking finding for me, that regret at leaving could turn into coming out of hiding and finding ways to re-enter education through making different choices, choices of personal decision-making. The street kids I talked and worked with during my research, spoke strongly of the need for some form of education. The majority of this group had attended basic literacy and numeracy courses in order to improve their skills, and together we worked through some basic employment interview techniques— they still had hopes of finding employment and establishing a future pathway.

Where early school leavers find themselves today is revealed in this study through finely detailed narrative analysis of surveys and discussions amongst actual and potential early school leavers. Some are lost in alienation, drugs, homelessness, isolation from significant others in their lives, lack of future direction and optimism, or disempowered in their living through compounding negative events that constrain their participation. Some are at risk of all these things while they stay at school, the only thing they have known, perhaps their only safe place. Some leave, drift back, lost, seeking for the life sustenance that some person might just give them. Some return in penitence to prove they were not the bad person they seemed when they were asked to leave. Some find

themselves asking, “What do I do with myself now I have left?” They come back to ask, “What will I do?”

There are two questions that forge their way out of this study of early school leavers, into my asking them in the public arena of this chapter. What can we do, as conscientious and devoted teachers, to ease the re-entry or retain early school leavers who might return in some kind of hope and search for a personal future? What can we do, as conscientious and devoted teachers, to transform the conditions of compulsory schooling in ways that are more palatable, that is, in ways that young people see as optimistic prospects for being and relating in our world today? These two questions signify the limitations of my thesis in that my real concern is about helping year 9 to 12 students in school more than outside school where they might already be unreachable.

If regret at leaving turns into a positive and proactive desire to re-enter school, there must be a great need for some form of easy access to ‘re-enter’ the system, especially for those who leave at a very young age in year 10. While it might be an easy response to say courses are available, such as those at Adult Education and the TAFE, young people’s awareness of these courses and access to them is not always as simple as we might think and as research has shown. The young people might be living rough, on the streets, have no access to letter box drop or newspaper, and stay away from public places of advertising or libraries. Though somewhat amazingly they find each other and hang out in malls, a coffee shop, or shopping centres, they still isolate their group from the mainstream, unlikely to go looking outside their group. Their insularity prohibits connection with their world outside. For example, in one large shopping centre in Hobart, the popular upstairs coffee shop became so much the territory of the unemployed

and early school leavers, which the management, perhaps to their credit, or ironically, opened another downstairs for those who felt excluded from their coffee shop upstairs. They become an exclusive self-protecting group.

Apart from being isolated from publicity, they risk alienation if they do step over the threshold into a course. A study I made of the online enrolment processes in most states of Australia shows that an applicant would need to demonstrate information about the last school they attended, the subjects they took and the level of achievement they attained, and other background knowledge that each course specifies. The trivia of administration, form filling and being compared with others raise the same dilemmas and monsters that caused early school leavers to leave school in the first place. One might say, here, the monster raises its head again for them.

In another case, for those who wish to re-enter mainstream education it is not easy either. Apart from any pre-enrolment conditions, interview or behavioural stipulations, there is also the 'loss of face' concern for those students who return to their previous school. Going back to your old school, the bravado and 15 seconds of fame gained when you left, you must now face up to your peers and say, "Life out there is not as good as I hoped it would be." To return would take a great deal of motivation on behalf of the student and a change in the school's approach to welcome her or him back so that he or she remain welcomed. It would take a re-entry link that would be someone to act as the support person for the student's return to the school. It would take an overt school structure, like te Reile's Sapphire and Ruby Senior Colleges (2000), that provides subjects for those re-entering so that current students could see that if they left, opportunities to return once more would still be open to them.

Boundaries and Possibilities

In this closing chapter, I wish to point out that because there were certain limits and constraints on the boundaries that were necessary for me as a research student to place upon the research field, some factors still remain to be investigated that might further amplify our understandings of why students leave school early and the ways we might bring them back. Though this is not the kind of super project that Dwyer (1996) conducted in Devonport and Lamb (2001) conducted in Hobart— two researchers officially appointed and funded by the Education Department or UTAS to research early school leavers in Tasmania, my research was as large a project. It was unfinanced by official research grants but supported by the university in which I am enrolled for a Ph.D., and by the schools and community organisations involved. Its research base, data, analysis and interpretive discussion are substantially forth giving in terms of demonstrating ways of coming to evidence and understanding the underlying compounding circumstances that compel young people to want to leave school early. Without outside financial support and the technical infrastructure, it was impossible to gather more data and survey more students. Each of the ELSS forms was manually collated and data counted and entered by myself. This took a particularly long time as there were over 1500 forms of four pages each. If the forms were data oriented forms and I had access to a data reader, the forms could have been completed much earlier in the research period. It was also difficult to follow up with the initial ELSS as students lost interest—I was lacking administrative support, and the privacy/ethical situation did not allow me to find out where the high school students had moved to for years 11 and 12. The ELSS was limited to co-educational colleges/high schools and it might have

been helpful to look also at the two single gender high schools nearby to compare the factors affecting early school leavers in these schools against the factors found by this research. The cost of advertising and postage also limited the ability to contact former students who had left school before the completion of year 12.

If this research had been conducted under a financially supported systemic structure with complete support from the state education system, then a much closer study may have been undertaken which included parental interviews and a longitudinal study and survey with students well after they had completed the initial ELSS.

Since my initial research was undertaken, the Tasmanian State Government has organised the collection of both school data and subject completion data to obtain a more comprehensive array of statistics for the state. While I have passed on my research to a State Government officer, in terms of being helpful to Government research, I found my access to Government data was barred, limited as it was to state employees and those who have access to data under the Tasmanian Privacy Act.

Research in this thesis represents an example of a marriage of quantitative and qualitative research that is a worthy and respectable basis for strong decision making to occur. What is important is to learn the truth of the evidence. To take a complex lived experience and derive from it the required numerical evidence divorces it from the subjective response that gives the lived experience meaning. Even if like Julian Meyrick, (2014) says occurred in his research,

> I had not made egregious errors in my quantitative analysis, as some claimed, but I had made enough mistakes to give me pause for thought – and to reflect on the impoverished rule of quantitative data over our lives, the Tyranny of Numbers that

> insists we treat any string of figures, however removed, as "objective" and all qualitative judgements, however informed, as "anecdotal." (Meyrick, 2014)

The real outcome desired, is not what you can get the statistics to tell you. Rather the challenge is to tell the truth with them. This is my endeavour.

The evidence manifested overwhelmingly in this thesis makes it clear that imperatively the Government ought to continue to support a responsible approach to understanding the needs of young people in Tasmania today. The world of education is torn by conflicting expectations about what young people should do or be and overrides the choices available for the young people to choose for themselves, a direction that both reveals and responds to their diversity. There are two straightforward moves that this research can lead toward, and that Government could take up directly. One way is for the Government to support research that would include continued approaches made to each student who wants to leave school prior to the end of year 12 in order to discern reasons behind the choice. A follow up survey by the education system twelve months after the students have left might give a better idea of end destinations for those leavers. A survey of students at the end of 2014 and 2015 would be beneficial to give an early indication if the recommended changes to the Tasmanian Education System in 2009 and the introduction of Polytechnics and Academies, and their subsequent remodelling, had any effect on retention of students. These structures were removed in 2012 but may have had an impact on the students who were at school at the time the structures were operating.

Another would be to consider research into the establishment of a supportive structure or system, which would allow, encourage and financially support early school

leavers to return to education. Given the number of students working part-time, a curriculum that allowed for part-time students or with a flexible timetable could also be beneficial. Within such a structure, online access to education is available as an alternative to attending school though a certain amount of self-regulation and discipline is required for students attempting to gain certification via this method. Questions about its success for assisting students to remain in education ought to be raised, researched and understood.

But I am not so much worried about what a government or research institution ought to do or not. I am more interested in what deeper understanding my research discloses about the lives of young people in education.

Stoking fires of interest

My thesis began by considering a state of loss. This was based on a sense I had as an educator who was watching students walk out of my school lost from a system that they could not hope to be part of. Naoko Saito (2006), writing on Dewey and Emerson's work on perfectionist education, says that to rekindle the gleam of light we must start from a state of loss, a state of education that I resonated with, "the state of nihilism in democracy and education, the state in which the sense of what is beyond, the sense of otherness, and the sense of the whole, have been obliterated" (Saito, 2006, p. 160). I did though hold some hope that somehow there could be the possibility that we might be able to experience a moment of conversion. That if we were able to transcend those boundaries that come between our futures and us, we might redeem inspiration for living in communities of belonging in education. Where, I ask, might we find flashes of such inspiration? Dewey, according to Saito, suggests,

> Conscientious and devoted educators, as well as many young people who have lost their way, await such flashes of illumination—irradiating from a source that they have perhaps not yet seen but that they wish, or can be led to wish, or in any case need to see. (Saito, 2006, p. 160).

Right up to the time of writing this chapter, I have been looking for contemporary action to help answer my two underlying questions. Richard Richardson Jnr and Elizabeth Fisk-Skinner (1990), in an older study on adapting to diversity in subject offering and school structure, say "to suggest that institutions should change to accommodate greater diversity rather than expecting students to adapt to institutional practices is for many an argument for reducing quality" (p. 485). They went on to propose a model whereby institutions can achieve both goals of quality and diversity by adapting to support the achievements of more diverse learners (Richardson & Fisk-Skinner, 1990, p. 486).

Recently, two studies have gained my attention. The first, by Maxine McKew (2014), was about schools taking the initiative to retain quality but to increase diversity (McKew, 2014). As McKew says in her article, "At Charles la Trobe, in Melbourne's northern suburbs, teachers are addressing one of the big divides in Australian education – the way that subject choice, or the lack of it, is a barrier to a rich set of life choices". The second was a *TED talk* given by Geoff Mulgan. In this brief talk used to introduce the concept of a Studio School Mulgan states,

> …about five years ago, we asked what was the most important need for innovation in schooling here in the U.K. And we felt the most important priority was to bring together two sets of problems. One was large numbers of

> bored teenagers who just didn't like school, couldn't see any relationship between what they learned in school and future jobs. And employers who kept complaining that the kids coming out of school weren't actually ready for real work, didn't have the right attitudes and experience. (Mulgan, 2011).

Mulgan went on to say the name, Studio School, returns to the idea of the Renaissance studio where work and learning are integrated. Mulgan's Studio Schools are small schools up to 400 pupils, 14 to 19 year olds, where about 80 per cent of the curriculum is not done sitting in a classroom but in real-life physical projects. The student timetables are very similar to a 9 to 5 work environment, they work in teams and have a teacher and a mentor, the major difference is as Mulgan says, "Underlying it was some very simple ideas that large numbers of teenagers learn best by doing things, they learn best in teams and they learn best by doing things for real— all the opposite of what mainstream schooling actually does" (Mulgan, 2011).

In this final chapter of my thesis, I have come to discuss what a moment of conversion might be in the lives of those young people we have lost from school or those we are at risk of losing. The narratives of my thesis tell their stories and my own of the compounding circumstances of our lives that lead us to the choices we make toward our futures. Out of the surveys, discussions and dialogues in which I engaged hundreds of young people came heart rending stories that one can only describe as tragic, in that education systems have failed them and yet blame them for having failed these systems.

I have come to be sceptical of just how far research can take us in responding responsibly, lovingly and pragmatically to the needs of the young people who have become the characters in my thesis. This thesis reveals, I believe both alarmingly and truthfully, in the

lives of young people and my own, both the burden that the past can inflict upon us and the weight of apprehension that the future holds for us. In this final contemplation, I ask, how can we as conscientious and devoted educators transform that burden and that weight as Dewey suggests into a "storehouse of resources by which to move confidently forward?" (Dewey, 1934, p. 18)

A transforming moment of conversion?

The phenomenological project I have been writing from data that is both quantitative and qualitative is what I believe van Manen would describe as "a sober project." It is a project that reflects upon and seriously describes the lived experience of human existence of young people who leave school early or are at risk of leaving school early. It is also a solemn reflection on my own lived experience of being an early school leaver and becoming a teacher-educator-researcher later in life.

My brother often says, "That must be a great place you go to!" The first time I quizzed him on this, he said I have a tendency to drift away to a hiding place. My reply was that I use this place to reflect on what was coming. In my head, it is as if I am watching film-clips, changing their beginnings and endings. Writing this data up phenomenologically has heightened my means of giving meaning to the ways I choose to do things. It is in those places where I hide that I come to my self-understandings. van Manen (2007) refers to a text by Martinus Langeveld called *The secret place in the life of the child* (1983). The secret place is where the child withdraws to himself. According to van Manen, Langeveld sees this "space experience as a place of growth" (p. 23). The child may find such space experience perhaps under a table, behind a heavy curtain,

inside a discarded box, or wherever there is a corner where he or she can hide or withdraw. This is where the child may come to "self-understanding," as it were (p.23).

I have described in this thesis the spaces to which many early school leavers go. They go to live with those of similar minds, to live rough as a way of rejecting what others expect from them, to use alcohol and other drugs, to hide from the distasteful world they experience, to places where they are accepted. In those place of acceptance is perhaps where they are mostly likely to find self-understanding.

A transforming moment of conversion for conscientious and devoted teachers has to be that the school space is a space of acceptance. van Manen refers to the practice of being able to speak to our personal and professional lives as the phenomenology of practice. He suggests that "a phenomenology of practice aims to open up possibilities for creating formative relations between being and acting, between who we are and how we act, between thoughtfulness and tact" (p. 12). In the school space of acceptance, teachers call upon a notion of responsibility for others that we might call "pathic responsibility" (p.12). We call upon what van Manen describes as our "pathic" and "professional" knowledge, that is "pathic to the extent that the act of practice depends on the sense and sensuality of the body, personal presence, relational perceptiveness, tact for knowing what to say and do in contingent situations, thoughtful routines and practices" (p.12).

For me, a true moment of conversion occurs when we embrace a language that can communicate and express sensitive understandings, a language oriented to an experiential and lived sensibility of our life world and the life worlds of students (van Manen, 2007, p. 20). When we embrace our human existence with all its fragilities, communicate with openness to possibilities for understanding ourselves and our

students, we can convert to the openness of genuine dialogue that truly belongs to the storehouses of resources that can move teachers and students forward confidently together.

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APPENDIX 1

Communicating: Communication between home and school is regular, two-way, and meaningful.

Parenting: Parenting skills are promoted and supported.

Student learning: Parents play an integral role in assisting student learning.

Volunteering: Parents are welcome in the school, and their support and assistance are sought.

School decision-making and advocacy: Parents are full partners in the decision that affect children and families.

Collaborating with community: Community resources are used to strengthen schools, families, and student learning.

(Esler et al., 2002) p394

Appendix 2 Survey instrument *Page 1*

I am asking for your assistance in trying to find answers to a number of questions. I have noticed that some students do not like school or feel that it is a waste of time for them. Students may also decide to 'drop out' at the end of year 10, year 11 or during year 12. I would like to know why this is happening. Some students may have given up on school well before this and only attend now and again, some attend for a short period of time each day. ***If you do not wish to you do not have to complete this survey, it is voluntary.*** *Please,* ***do not give your name or the name of your school or teachers;*** *take the time to answer these questions as best you can. Sometimes you only need to circle or tick a response close to where your answer would be, other times you will be asked to write a few words.*

My current year/year is *9 10 11 12 (please circle* ***one****)*

I am male/female *(please circle* ***one****)*

My current age is *13 14 15 16 17 18 older (please circle* ***one****)*

Please tick <u>one</u> of the following

- *I enjoy school* ☐
- *I do not mind school* ☐
- *I hate school* ☐

Please tick <u>one</u> of the following

- *I am doing very well at school* ☐
- *I am going OK at school* ☐
- *I am not doing very well but I try* ☐
- *I am not doing very well in any subject* ☐

I am going to stay at school until: *(Please tick the <u>two</u> things that are your first and second choice)*

- *The end of year 12* ☐
- *I can get a job* ☐
- *I get an apprenticeship or traineeship* ☐
- *I am old enough to leave* ☐

My best subjects are*:* _____ _____

My worst subjects are*:* _____ _____

Think of ***<u>one</u>*** *teacher <u>you like</u> or get on with, please* ***<u>do not name them</u>****, what do you like about this teacher?*

_____

Think of ***<u>one</u>*** *teacher you <u>do not</u> like or get on with, please* ***<u>do not name them</u>****, what do you dislike about this teacher?*

_____

Please circle the 'best years' at school

Kindergarten, Prepatory, 1 2 3 4 5 6 (Primary)

Years/year 7 8 9 10 11 12 (Secondary)

What did you like or do in these years to make them your favourite years?

_____

Whom do you discuss you future education ideas or careers with? (Please tick)

Parents ☐

Teachers ☐

Friends ☐

Careers advisors ☐

Do you miss a lot of classes through being absent? *Yes No (circle one)*

If yes, are you absent because you are: (tick one) *sick a lot* ☐
sick of school ☐

*Number the following reasons (1 to 3) you think young people (and yourself) may use for leaving school before the end of year 12 (**1** being **most** important 3 being least important)*

Parents ☐

Financial pressure

On Parents ☐

On students ☐

Health problems ☐

Boyfriend/Girlfriend ☐

Want to leave home ☐

Hate school ☐

Current subjects are not very good ☐

Want to get a job ☐

Other reasons? _____

Do you work part-time? *Yes* *No* *(please circle one)*

If 'yes' how many hours per week on average? _____

Page 3

I work part-time because:

- *I want the money* ☐
- *I want to see what it is like to work* ☐
- *I might get a traineeship out of this* ☐
- *It makes me feel good* ☐
- *It gives me some independence* ☐
- *I need the money to help my family* ☐
- *I need the money for my mobile phone* ☐
- *I need the money for clothes* ☐

*If you **do not** work part-time please answer the following questions by ticking the ones that closely apply to you.*

I do not work part-time because:

- *My parents will not let me* ☐
- *I want to study for school* ☐
- *I cannot get transport to a job* ☐
- *I play a lot of sport* ☐
- *I will get a job later* ☐
- *I do not need money as I get a good allowance* ☐

Do you think you would like to: *(Please tick the two things that are your first and second choice)*

- *Go to university some day* ☐
- *Go to a hospitality course* ☐
- *Get an apprenticeship or traineeship* ☐
- *Work for my family* ☐
- *Start my own business (like a hairdresser)* ☐
- *Go to TAFE for a course* ☐
- *Work in a retail store* ☐
- *Work in childcare* ☐

How important is education to you? *Please rank 1 to 5 (by circling) with* ***1*** *being* ***most*** *important and* ***5*** *being* ***least*** *important*

1 2 3 4 5

Do you think it will help you in your future?

_____

Do you think you might leave school before the end of year 12?

Yes No (please circle one)

If yes, is this because:(Please tick those that closely apply to you, please list other reasons below)

My parents cannot afford to send me ☐

I do not have any friends at school ☐

The teachers do not like me ☐

I want to get a job ☐

I find school boring ☐

I am always bullied at school ☐

I always feel 'dumb' when in classes ☐

My boyfriend (or) girlfriend is not at school and I want to be with them ☐

I have to look after my younger brothers and sisters ☐

I have to look after a sick family member ☐

I want to leave home because of family violence ☐

My parents do not want me to go to school ☐

Comments:

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Thank you for your help. This study has been approved by the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee. If needed, verification of approval can be obtained either by writing to the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee, c/- Office of Research and Development, Curtin University of Technology, GPO Box U1987, Perth, 6845 or by telephoning 92662784.

APPENDIX 3

ELSS One results

What are your perceptions about school and how you are performing	**TOTAL yr. 9/10**	**TOTAL yr. 11/12**	**TOTAL ALL**	**PER CENT**
I enjoy school	146	103	249	26%
I do not mind school	393	230	623	64%
I hate school	82	19	101	11%
TOTALS	621	352	**973**	
I am doing very well at school	134	61	195	20%
I am going OK at school	409	263	672	69%
I am not doing very well but I try	64	24	88	10%
I am not doing very well in any subject	12	3	15	2%
TOTALS	619	351	**970**	
I am going to stay at school	**until:**			
The end of year 12	434	311	745	59%
I can get a job	157	65	222	18%
I get an apprenticeship or traineeship	187	41	228	18%
I am old enough to leave	55	11	66	5%
TOTALS	833	428	**1261**	

Whom do you discuss you future education ideas or careers with?	**TOTAL yr. 9/10**	**TOTAL yr. 11/12**	**TOTAL ALL**	**PER CENT**
Parents	477	275	752	41.07%
Teachers	165	125	290	15.84%
Friends	431	249	680	37.14%
Careers advisors	54	55	109	5.95%
TOTAL	1127	704	**1831**	
How important is education to you?				
1 (Most Important)	202	141	343	35.69%
2	188	105	293	30.49%
3	96	42	138	14.36%
4	69	39	108	11.24%
5 (Least Important)	52	27	79	8.22%
TOTAL	607	354	**961**	
Do you think school will help you in your future?				
Yes	480	306	786	86%
No	23	7	30	3%
Maybe	80	22	102	11%

Do you miss many classes through being absent?				
Yes	99	58	157	16.74%
No	500	281	781	83.26%

Reasons you think young people may use for leaving school before the end of year 12	**TOTAL yr. 9/10**	**TOTAL yr. 11/12**	**TOTAL ALL**	**PER CENT**
Parents	366	273	639	14.95%
Financial pressure **On Parents**	205	108	313	7.32%
Financial pressure **On students**	175	105	280	6.55%
Health problems	129	99	228	5.33%
Boyfriend/Girlfriend	268	126	394	9.22%
Want to leave home	329	145	474	11.09%
Hate school	394	204	598	13.99%
Current subjects are not very good	498	301	799	18.69%
Want to get a job	332	218	550	12.87%
TOTAL	2696	1579	**4275**	

Do you work part-time?				
Yes	200	224	424	44.54%
No	402	126	528	55.46%
If yes, how many hours per week?				
<5 hours per week	28	50	78	18.40%
<10 hours per week	72	37	109	25.71%
<15 hours per week	61	75	136	32.08%
<20 hours per week	18	36	54	12.74%
<25 hours per week	14	17	31	7.31%
<30 hours per week	4	8	12	2.83%
<35 hours per week	3	1	4	0.94%
TOTAL	200	224	**424**	

I work part-time because:	**TOTAL yr. 9/10**	**TOTAL yr. 11/12**	**TOTAL ALL**	**PER CENT**
I want the money	184	180	364	28.28%
I want to see what it is like to work	88	58	146	11.34%
I might get a traineeship out of this	31	13	44	3.42%
It makes me feel good	75	54	129	10.02%
It gives me some independence	126	127	253	19.66%
I need the money to help my family	22	24	46	3.57%
I need the money for my mobile phone	63	77	140	10.88%
I need the money for clothes	79	86	165	12.82%
TOTAL	668	619	**1287**	
I do not work part-time because:				
My parents will not let me	27	5	32	3.65%
I want to study for school	108	66	174	19.86%
I cannot get transport to a job	45	26	71	8.11%
I play a lot of sport	103	48	151	17.24%
I will get a job later	276	90	366	41.78%
I do not need money as I get a good allowance	61	21	82	9.36%

Do you think you would like to:				
Go to University some day	321	227	548	30.41%
Go to a Drysdale Hospitality course	31	34	65	3.61%
Get an apprenticeship or traineeship	191	90	281	15.59%
Work for my Family	23	11	34	1.89%
Start my own business (like a hairdresser)	154	56	210	11.65%
Go to TAFE for a course	166	87	253	14.04%
Work in a shop like *Big W*	43	13	56	3.11%
Work in childcare	63	24	87	4.83%
Join the Army/Navy/Air force	91	62	153	8.49%
Join the Police	74	41	115	6.38%
TOTAL	1157	645	**1802**	

Do you think you might leave school before the end of year 12?	**TOTAL yr. 9/10**	**TOTAL yr. 11/12**	**TOTAL ALL**	**PER CENT**
Yes	160	59	219	23.45%
No	440	275	715	76.55%

If YES, is this because:				
My parents cannot afford to send me	5	3	8	2.22%
I do not have any friends at school	4	1	5	1.39%
The teachers do not like me	11	3	14	3.88%
I want to get a job	123	46	169	46.81%
I find school boring	63	26	89	24.65%
I am always bullied at school	7	2	9	2.49%
I always feel ‘dumb’ when in classes	21	7	28	7.76%
My boy/girlfriend is not at school and I want to be with them	12	5	17	4.71%
I have to look after my younger brothers/sisters	3	0	3	0.83%
I have to look after a sick family member	3	0	3	0.83%
I want to leave home because of family violence	10	2	12	3.32%
My parents do not want me to go to school	4	0	4	1.11%

The following information is from a student perspective and is in the language they used in the surveys. Correction of spelling has occurred and in one or two cases, especially subjects, the 'closeness' of comment/subject has resulted in the one comment/subject being selected by me in my statistical representation.

Subjects Students enjoyed	**TOTAL yr. 9/10**	**TOTAL yr. 11/12**	**TOTAL ALL**	**PER CENT**
All subjects	3	0	3	0.14%
Accounting	0	15	15	0.70%
Adventure Education /Outdoor Pursuits	0	13	13	0.61%
Ancient Civilization	13	7	20	0.94%
Art	135	13	148	6.93%
Athlete Development	0	5	5	0.23%
Australia Asia Pacific	0	18	18	0.84%
Automotive	0	12	12	0.56%
Biology	13	18	31	1.45%
Business Studies	36	4	40	1.87%
Chemistry	0	11	11	0.51%
Child studies/ Working with Children	39	5	44	2.06%
Computer Graphics	21	14	35	1.64%

Creative writing/English Writing	16	3	19	0.89%
Dance	32	10	42	1.97%
Digital Art		3	3	0.14%
Drama	43	9	52	2.43%
English (no distinction made for course)	237	74	311	14.56%
Environmental Science		6	6	0.28%
Foods/Catering (no distinction made for course)	85	12	97	4.54%
Health/PE	74	36	110	5.15%
History	20	13	33	1.54%
Humanities	19	1	20	0.94%
ICT	47	10	57	2.67%
Languages	8	2	10	0.47%
Legal Studies		18	18	0.84%
Mathematics (no distinction made for course)	177	62	239	11.19%
Mathematics extended	1		1	0.05%
MDT	46		46	2.15%
Media	4		4	0.19%
Metalwork	38	2	40	1.87%
Music	52	5	57	2.67%

Photography		20	20	0.94%
Physical Sciences		9	9	0.42%
Physics		5	5	0.23%
Psychology		28	28	1.31%
Science (no distinction made for course)	101	15	116	5.43%
Science extended	5		5	0.23%
Sociology		15	15	0.70%
SOSE	93	2	95	4.45%
Sport	86	21	107	5.01%
Sport and Rec		15	15	0.70%
Sport Science	37	18	55	2.57%
Textiles	14	4	18	0.84%
Tourism		3	3	0.14%
VET Automotive		3	3	0.14%
VET Construction		1	1	0.05%
VET Engineering		7	7	0.33%
VET Hospitality		11	11	0.51%
VET Sport and Recreation		4	4	0.19%
Woodwork	58	1	59	2.76%
TOTAL		583	**2136**	

Subjects students do not enjoy	**TOTAL yr. 9/10**	**TOTAL yr. 11/12**	**TOTAL ALL**	**PER CENT**
All subjects	9	1	10	0.72%
Accounting		5	5	0.36%
Adventure Education/Outdoor Pursuits	7	1	8	0.58%
Ancient Civilizations		1	1	0.07%
Art	11	3	14	1.01%
Athlete Development	0		0	0.00%
Australia Asia Pacific		4	4	0.29%
Automotive	3		3	0.22%
Biology		11	11	0.79%
Business Studies	10	2	12	0.86%
Chemistry		7	7	0.50%
Child studies/Working with Children	6		6	0.43%
Computer Graphics	12	5	17	1.22%
Creative writing/English Writing	2	2	4	0.29%
Dance	1	1	2	0.14%
Digital Art		0	0	0.00%
Drama	13	1	14	1.01%

English (no distinction made for course)	146	77	223	16.03%
Environmental Science		0	0	0.00%
Foods/Catering (no distinction made for course)	19	5	24	1.73%
Health/PE	33	9	42	3.02%
History	3	1	4	0.29%
Humanities	17		17	1.22%
ICT	8	6	14	1.01%
Languages	6		6	0.43%
Legal Studies		7	7	0.50%
Mathematics (no distinction made for course)	317	71	388	27.89%
Mathematics extended	9	2	11	0.79%
MDT	3		3	0.22%
Media	0		0	0.00%
Metalwork	5		5	0.36%
Music	12	4	16	1.15%
Photography		0	0	0.00%
Physical Sciences		5	5	0.36%
Physics		3	3	0.22%
Psychology		14	14	1.01%

Science (no distinction made for course)	273	19	292	20.99%
Science extended	6		6	0.43%
Sociology		11	11	0.79%
SOSE	125		125	8.99%
Sport	16	4	20	1.44%
Sport and Recreation		0	0	0.00%
Sport Science	22	4	26	1.87%
Textiles	0	1	1	0.07%
Tourism		5	5	0.36%
VET Automotive		0	0	0.00%
VET Construction		0	0	0.00%
VET Engineering		0	0	0.00%
VET Hospitality		0	0	0.00%
VET Sport and Recreation		0	0	0.00%
Woodwork	4	1	5	0.36%
TOTAL		293	**1391**	

Positive Characteristics of Teachers (student)	**TOTAL yr. 9/10**	**TOTAL yr. 11/12**	**TOTAL ALL**	**PER CENT**
A Nice Person	75	29	104	6.71%
Always there (available)	2		2	0.13%
Approachable	11	12	23	1.48%
Can really Teach	38	15	53	3.42%
Can talk to them	89	25	114	7.35%
Caring	18	8	26	1.68%
Challenge us	2		2	0.13%
Controls class so we can work	9		9	0.58%
Cool	29	5	34	2.19%
Describes things well	16	2	18	1.16%
Doesn't Judge you	1		1	0.06%
Doesn't Yell	6	3	9	0.58%
Down to Earth	0		0	0.00%
Eager to help	3		3	0.19%
Easy Going	64	20	84	5.42%
Easy to get on with	20	21	41	2.65%
Encouraging	16	1	17	1.10%
Fair (Firm but Fair)	18	9	27	1.74%
Friendly	46	45	91	5.87%

Fun	112	28	140	9.03%
Funny	45	5	50	3.23%
Give you time	4		4	0.26%
Good communications	10	4	14	0.90%
Helps us (willing to help you)	72	39	111	7.16%
Help us equally	4		4	0.26%
Inspirational	5	2	7	0.45%
Interesting	7	4	11	0.71%
Kind	26	8	34	2.19%
Knows how to Discipline	3		3	0.19%
Knows me (about me)	8	4	12	0.77%
Knows the subject	16	9	25	1.61%
Learn Lots	5		5	0.32%
Make you feel important	1	2	3	0.19%
Maintains a confidence (doesn't tell your secrets)	1		1	0.06%
Not Boring	3		3	0.19%
Not Patronising	6	1	7	0.45%
Not Strict	6	3	9	0.58%
Organised	4	2	6	0.39%
Passion for their subject	18	3	21	1.35%
Polite	1		1	0.06%
Relate to you	12	2	14	0.90%

Relaxed	16	1	17	1.10%
Strict/in Charge	1		1	0.06%
Supportive	16	4	20	1.29%
Talk to you like an adult	8	12	20	1.29%
The way they teach	8	26	34	2.19%
They explain when you don't understand	38	24	62	4.00%
They Listen	41	20	61	3.94%
They make the subject interesting	16	16	32	2.06%
They respect you	8	13	21	1.35%
Treat me Fairly	7	2	9	0.58%
Treat us with respect	7	7	14	0.90%
Tries to help you	22	8	30	1.94%
Understanding	56	23	79	5.10%
Welcoming	3		3	0.19%
Young	3	1	4	0.26%
TOTAL			**1550**	

Negative Characteristics of Teachers	**TOTAL yr. 9/10**	**TOTAL yr. 11/12**	**TOTAL ALL**	**PERCENT**
Always in a Bad Mood	30	11	41	4.03%
Always negative/Negative attitude	9		9	0.88%
Angry/Gets Angry	27	10	37	3.64%
Boring	20	21	41	4.03%
Bossy	16	17	33	3.24%
Call you names	5		5	0.49%
Can't control the class	12	5	17	1.67%
Can't get on with them	10	1	11	1.08%
Can't teach	28	15	43	4.23%
Creepy/Scary	18	3	21	2.06%
Disorganised	5	4	9	0.88%
Disrespects you	11		11	1.08%
Doesn't care	12	6	18	1.77%
Doesn't Explain	32	24	56	5.51%
Doesn't Help	12	13	25	2.46%
Doesn't let you explain	10		10	0.98%
Doesn't Listen	44	2	46	4.52%
Doesn't want to talk to you	5	5	10	0.98%

Don't appreciate it when you try	4		4	0.39%
Don't know much (they)	9		9	0.88%
Don’t take time to teach	3	1	4	0.39%
Embarrasses you in front of class	3	3	6	0.59%
Gets in your face	2		2	0.20%
Gets stressed	3		3	0.29%
Gives Detentions	6		6	0.59%
Hard to learn from	8		8	0.79%
Hard to Understand	1	1	2	0.20%
Hates children/kids	4		4	0.39%
Have Favourites	10	16	26	2.56%
Ignore you	2	4	6	0.59%
Loud	4		4	0.39%
Makes you feel Dumb	9	3	12	1.18%
Makes you feel Unimportant	9		9	0.88%
Makes you work	13	6	19	1.87%
Mean	46	1	47	4.62%
No work marked/no feedback	4		4	0.39%
Not Flexible	1		1	0.10%
Not nice	11	1	12	1.18%
Old	7	6	13	1.28%
Patronising	2	2	4	0.39%

Picks on you	35	7	42	4.13%
Puts you down	18	2	20	1.97%
Rude	21	17	38	3.74%
Sarcastic	8		8	0.79%
Self-centred	5	2	7	0.69%
Smells	13	1	14	1.38%
Snobby	2		2	0.20%
Stinks of smokes	9		9	0.88%
Strict/Too strict	47	15	62	6.10%
Their Attitude	9	2	11	1.08%
They don’t understand you	12	13	25	2.46%
They don't want to Teach	6	2	8	0.79%
They talk too much	10	10	20	1.97%
Too Easy Going	3		3	0.29%
Too Serious	10	3	13	1.28%
Treat us like kids/children	9	10	19	1.87%
Treats us like idiots	4		4	0.39%
Two faced	2		2	0.20%
Unfair	7	1	8	0.79%
Untrained Teachers	1		1	0.10%
Yells/Shouts	51	2	53	5.21%
TOTAL	749	268	**1017**	

APPENDIX 4

Results of ELSS Two. This survey was conducted with some of the year ten students from the first survey when they were enrolled in year twelve.

Follow up Group of year 12 students	**School A**	**School B**	**TOTAL**	**%**
Males	**35**	**39**		
16 years old	0	1	1	1.35%
17 years old	28	29	57	77.03%
18 years old*	7	9	16	21.62%
Total			**74**	
Females	**46**	**45**		
16 years old	1	1	2	2.20%
17 years old	34	39	73	80.22%
18 years old*	11	5	16	17.58%
Total			**91**	

*** Survey was completed in June, students in year 12**

Follow up Group of year 12 students	**School A**	**School B**	**TOTAL**	**%**
I enjoy school	12	9	21	12.73%
I do not mind school	56	63	119	72.12%
I hate school	13	12	25	15.15%

Follow up Group of year 12 students	**School A**	**School B**	**TOTAL**	**%**
I am doing very well at school	13	11	24	14.55%
I am going OK at school	51	56	107	64.85%
I am not doing very well but I try	15	12	27	16.36%
I am not doing very well in any subject	2	5	7	4.24%
			165	
I am going to stay at school until:	**School A**	**School B**	**TOTAL**	**%**
The end of year 12	63	69	132	78.57%
I can get a job	6	9	15	8.93%
I get an apprenticeship or traineeship	8	7	15	8.93%
I am old enough to leave	4	2	6	3.57%
			168	
Whom do you discuss you future education ideas or careers with?	**School A**	**School B**	**TOTAL**	**%**
Parents	41	38	79	47.88%
Teachers	2	3	5	3.03%
Friends	35	41	76	46.06%
Careers advisors	3	2	5	3.03%
			165	

How important is education to you?	**School A**	**School B**	**TOTAL**	
1 (Most Important)	23	27	50	30.30%
2	42	39	81	49.09%
3	11	10	21	12.73%
4	4	6	10	6.06%
5 (Least Important)	1	2	3	1.82%
			165	

Do you think it will help you in your future?	**School A**	**School B**	**TOTAL**	
Yes	60	63	123	74.55%
No	7	9	16	9.70%
Maybe	14	12	26	15.76%
			165	

Do you miss a lot of classes through being absent?				
Yes	22	23	45	27.27%
No	59	61	120	72.73%
			165	

Follow up Group of year 12 students Reasons you think young people may use for leaving school before the end of year 12 (1-8)	**School A**	**School B**	**TOTAL**	
Parents	12	3	15	6.15%
Financial pressure On Parents	5	4	9	3.69%
Financial pressure On students	11	5	16	6.56%
Health problems	4	5	9	3.69%
Boyfriend/Girlfriend	11	5	16	6.56%
Want to leave home	18	9	27	11.07%
Hate school	43	18	61	25.00%
Current subjects are not very good	25	9	34	13.93%
Want to get a job	37	15	52	21.31%
Other	4	1	5	2.05%
			244	

Follow up Group of year 12 students Do you work part-time?	**School A**	**School B**	**TOTAL**	
Yes	47	48	95	57.58%
No	34	36	70	42.42%
			165	

If yes, hour many hours per week				
<5 hours per week	4	2	6	6.32%
<10 hours per week	9	12	21	22.11%
<15 hours per week	15	13	28	29.47%
<20 hours per week	12	14	26	27.37%
<25 hours per week	4	5	9	9.47%
<30 hours per week	3	2	5	5.26%
<35 hours per week	0	0	0	0.00%
			95	

Follow up Group of year 12 students	**School A**	**School B**	**TOTAL**	
I work part-time because:				
I want the money	24	14	38	35.85%
I want to see what it is like to work	7	6	13	12.26%
I might get a traineeship out of this	1	0	1	0.94%
It makes me feel good	2	2	4	3.77%
It gives me some independence	12	8	20	18.87%
I need the money to help my family	1	1	2	1.89%
I need the money for my mobile phone	6	6	12	11.32%
I need the money for clothes	11	5	16	15.09%

I do not work part-time because:	**School A**	**School B**	**TOTAL**	
My parents will not let me	4	6	10	14.29%
I want to study for school	7	9	16	22.86%
I cannot get transport to a job	1	1	2	2.86%
I play a lot of sport	8	5	13	18.57%
I will get a job later	11	10	21	30.00%
I do not need money as I get a good allowance	3	5	8	11.43%

Do you think you would like to:	**School A**	**School B**	**TOTAL**	
Go to University some day	38	45	83	50.30%
Go to a Drysdale Hospitality course	2	4	6	3.64%
Get an apprenticeship or traineeship	10	11	21	12.73%
Work for my Family	0	2	2	1.21%
Start my own business (like a hairdresser)	3	7	10	6.06%
Go to TAFE for a course	7	5	12	7.27%
Work in a shop like Big W	7	3	10	6.06%
Work in childcare	0	1	1	0.61%
Join the Army/Navy/Airforce	13	5	18	10.91%
Join the Police	1	1	2	1.21%
			165	

Do you think you might leave school before the end of year 12?	**School A**	**School B**	**TOTAL**	
Yes	12	17	29	17.58%
No	69	67	136	82.42%
If YES, is this because:				
My parents cannot afford to send me	0	1	1	3.45%
I do not have any friends at school	0	1	1	3.45%
The teachers do not like me	2	3	5	17.24%
I want to get a job	1	1	2	6.90%
I find school boring	1	1	2	6.90%
I am always bullied at school	0	2	2	6.90%
I always feel ‘dumb’ when in classes	6	7	13	44.83%
My boy/girlfriend is not at school and I want to be with them	1	0	1	0.00%
I have to look after my younger brothers/sisters	0	0	0	3.45%
I have to look after a sick family member	0	0	0	0.00%
I want to leave home because of family violence	0	1	1	0.00%
My parents do not want me to go to school	1	0	1	3.45%

Number of students from yr. 9 who left before yr. 11	**School A**	**School B**	**TOTAL**	%
	10	10	**20**	

Number of students from yr. 11 who left before yr. 12	**School A**	**School B**	**TOTAL**	
	19	20	**39**	

What happened to these students				
Jobs	12	11	23	38.98%
Apprenticeship/Trainee	8	12	20	33.90%
Defence Forces	2	1	3	5.08%
Family Issues	1	0	1	1.69%
Baby	2	3	5	8.47%
Could not be bothered with school	4	3	7	11.86%
			59	

APPENDIX 5

Results of ELSS Three. This survey was conducted with some of the year nine students from the first survey when they were enrolled in year twelve.

Follow up Group of year 12 students	**School A**	**School B**	**TOTAL**	
Males	10	12		
16 years old	0	1	1	4.55%
17 years old	10	9	19	86.36%
18 years old*	0	2	2	9.09%
Females	13	14		
16 years old	1	1	2	7.41%
17 years old	11	12	23	85.19%
18 years old*	1	1	2	7.41%

*** Survey was completed in June, students in yr. 12**

Follow up Group of year 12 students	**School A**	**School B**	**TOTAL**	
I enjoy school	3	3	6	12.24%
I do not mind school	17	18	35	71.43%
I hate school	3	5	8	16.33%

Follow up Group of year 12 students	**School A**	**School B**	**TOTAL**	
I am doing very well at school	2	3	5	10.20%
I am going OK at school	18	20	38	77.55%
I am not doing very well but I try	2	3	5	10.20%
I am not doing very well in any subject	1	0	1	2.04%

I am going to stay at school until:	**School A**	**School B**	**TOTAL**	
The end of year 12	18	20	38	77.55%
I can get a job	1	3	4	8.16%
I get an apprenticeship or traineeship	3	2	5	10.20%
I am old enough to leave	1	1	2	4.08%

Who do you discuss you future education ideas or careers with?	**School A**	**School B**	**TOTAL**	
Parents	9	6	15	30.61%
Teachers	1	3	4	8.16%
Friends	13	16	29	59.18%
Careers advisors	0	1	1	2.04%

	School	School		
How important is education to you?	**A**	**B**	**TOTAL**	
1 (Most Important)	5	4	9	18.37%
2	10	11	21	42.86%
3	5	6	11	22.45%
4	2	3	5	10.20%
5 (Least Important)	1	2	3	6.12%
			49	
Do you think it will help you in your future?	**School A**	**School B**	**TOTAL**	
Yes	18	18	36	73.47%
No	2	3	5	10.20%
Maybe	3	5	8	16.33%
			49	
Do you miss a lot of classes through being absent?	**School A**	**School B**	**TOTAL**	
Yes	5	7	12	24.49%
No	18	19	37	75.51%
			49	

Reasons you think young people may use for leaving school before the end of year 12 (1-8)	**School A**	**School B**	**TOTAL**	
Parents	3	1	4	3.31%
Financial pressure On Parents	2	2	4	3.31%
Financial pressure On students	7	5	12	9.92%
Health problems	4	5	9	7.44%
Boyfriend/Girlfriend	2	2	4	3.31%
Want to leave home	8	9	17	14.05%
Hate school	11	13	24	19.83%
Current subjects are not very good	5	9	14	11.57%
Want to get a job	15	13	28	23.14%
Other	4	1	5	4.13%
			121	

Do you work part-time?	**School A**	**School B**	**TOTAL**	
Yes	17	19	36	73.47%
No	6	7	13	26.53%
			49	

Hours per week

<5 hours per week	0	1	1	2.78%
<10 hours per week	3	3	6	16.67%
<15 hours per week	9	11	20	55.56%
<20 hours per week	3	3	6	16.67%
<25 hours per week	2	1	3	8.33%
<30 hours per week	0	0	0	0.00%
<35 hours per week	0	0	0	0.00%
			36	
	School	**School**		
I work part-time because:	**A**	**B**	**TOTAL**	
I want the money	16	14	30	30.61%
I want to see what it is like to work	7	6	13	13.27%
I might get a traineeship out of this	1	0	1	1.02%
It makes me feel good	2	0	2	2.04%
It gives me some independence	8	8	16	16.33%
I need the money to help my family	0	1	1	1.02%
I need the money for my mobile phone	6	6	12	12.24%
I need the money for clothes	11	12	23	23.47%

I do not work part-time because:	School A	School B	TOTAL	
My parents will not let me	1	0	1	7.69%
I want to study for school	3	4	7	53.85%
I cannot get transport to a job	0	1	1	7.69%
I play a lot of sport	1	1	2	15.38%
I will get a job later	0	1	1	7.69%
I do not need money as I get a good allowance	1	0	1	7.69%

Do you think you would like to:	School A	School B	TOTAL	
Go to University some day	17	19	36	53.73%
Go to a Drysdale Hospitality course	2	4	6	8.96%
Get an apprenticeship or traineeship	2	3	5	7.46%
Work for my Family	0	0	0	0.00%
Start my own business (like a hairdresser)	1	0	1	1.49%
Go to TAFE for a course	3	5	8	11.94%
Work in a shop like Big W	2	3	5	7.46%
Work in childcare	0	1	1	1.49%
Join the Army/Navy/Airforce	2	1	3	4.48%
Join the Police	1	1	2	2.99%
			67	

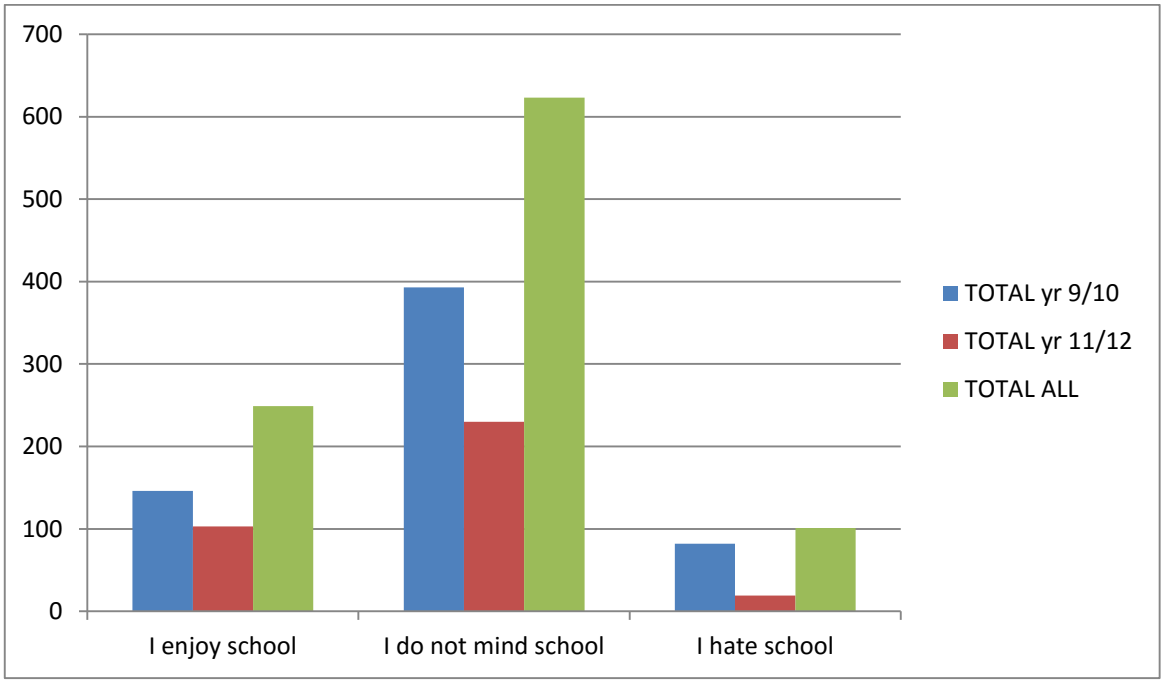
Do you think you might leave school before the end of year 12?	**School A**	**School B**	**TOTAL**	
Yes	22	23	45	91.84%
No	1	3	4	8.16%
			49	
If YES, is this because:	**School A**	**School B**	**TOTAL**	
My parents cannot afford to send me	0	1	1	8.33%
I do not have any friends at school	0	1	1	8.33%
The teachers do not like me	1	2	3	25.00%
I want to get a job	1	1	2	16.67%
I find school boring	0	1	1	8.33%
I am always bullied at school	0	0	0	0.00%
I always feel ‘dumb’ when in classes	1	1	2	16.67%
My boy/girlfriend is not at school and I want to be with them	0	0	0	0.00%
I have to look after my younger brothers/sisters	0	0	0	0.00%
I have to look after a sick family member	0	0	0	0.00%
I want to leave home because of family violence	0	1	1	8.33%
My parents do not want me to go to school	1	0	1	8.33%
			12	

Number of students from yr. 9 who left before yr. 11	**School A**	**School B**	**TOTAL**
	12	13	**25**

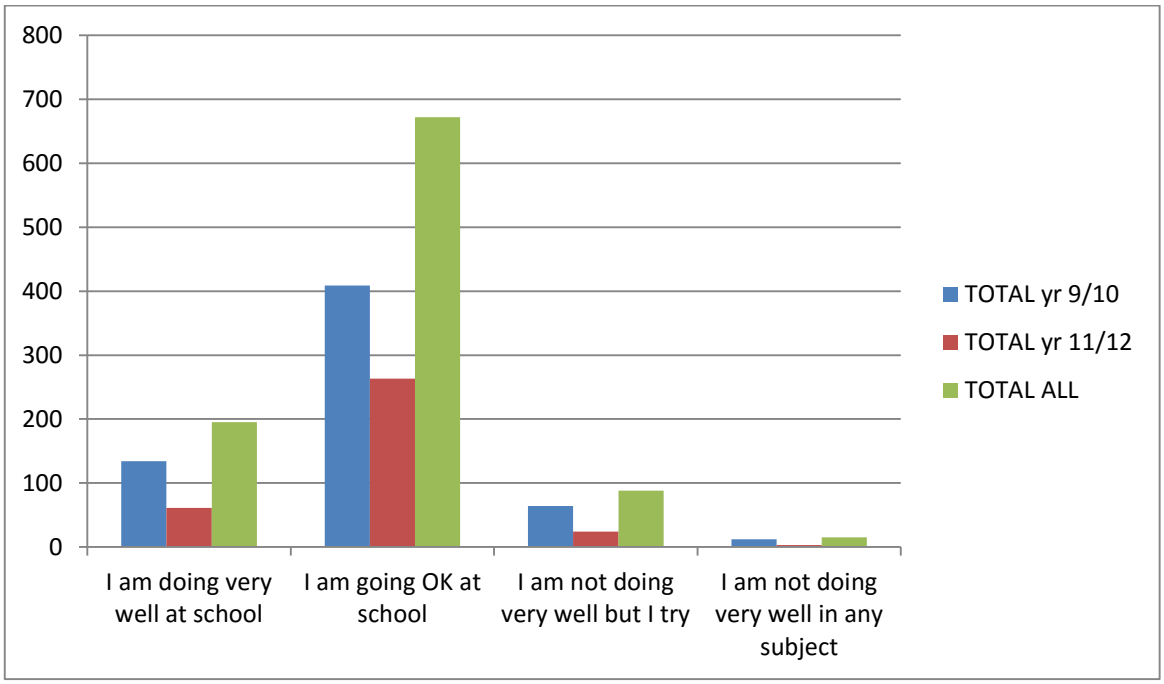
Number of students from yr. 11 who left before yr. 12	**School A**	**School B**	**TOTAL**
	20	17	**37**

What happened to these students	**School A**	**School B**	**TOTAL**	
Jobs	8	8	16	43.24%
Apprenticeship/Trainee	8	7	15	40.54%
Defence Forces	2	1	3	8.11%
Family Issues	1	0	1	2.70%
Baby	0	0	0	0.00%
Could not be bothered with school	1	1	2	5.41%
			37	

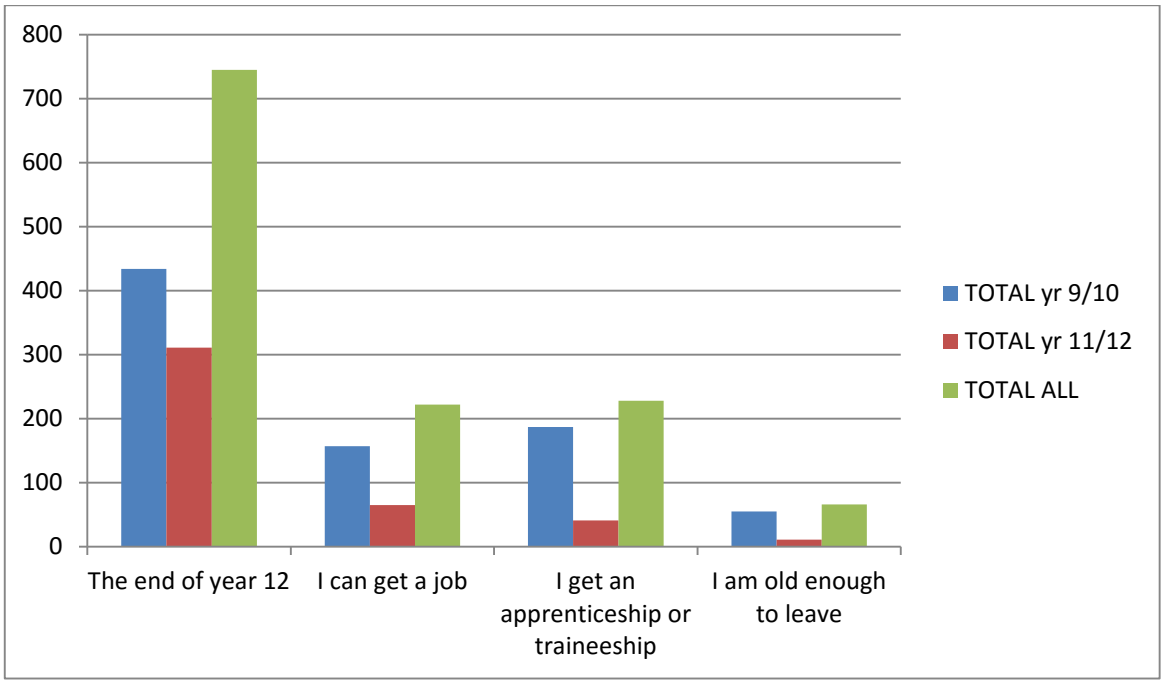
APPENDIX 6



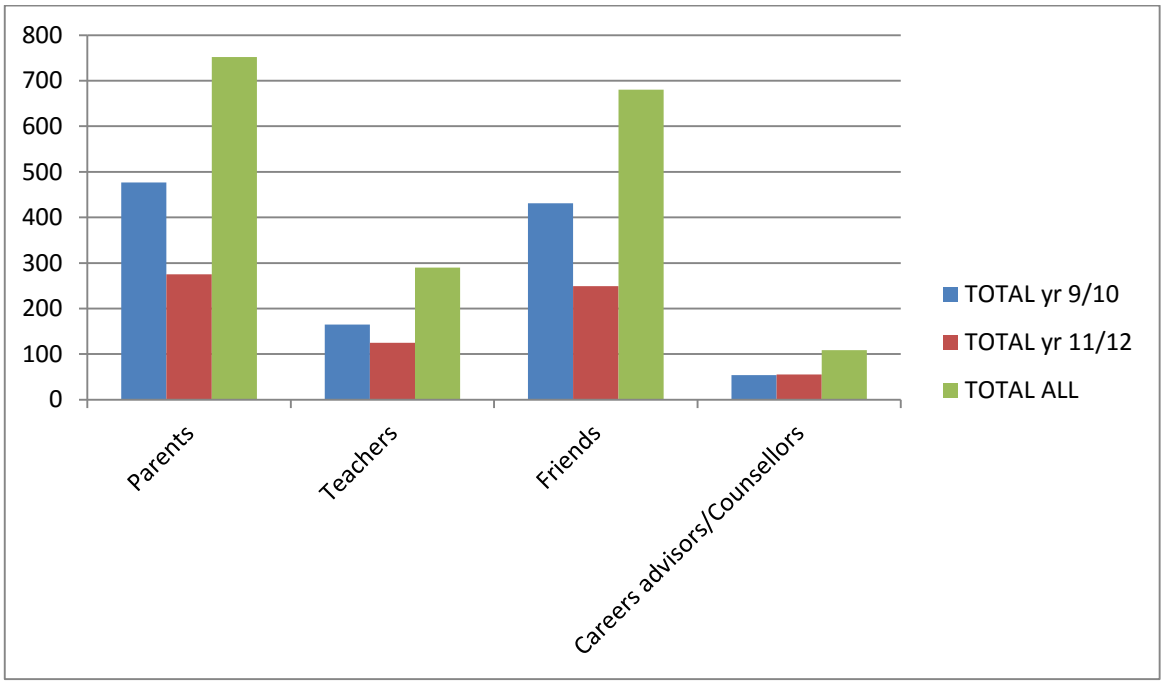
Graph one Attitude to school



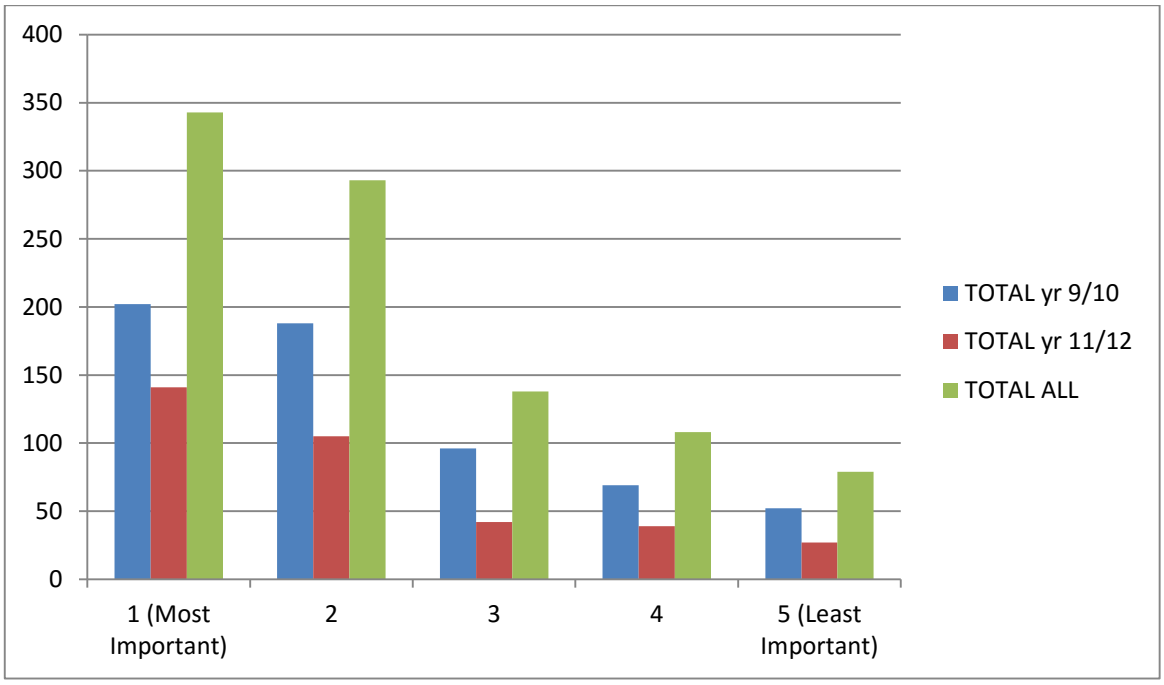
Graph two Perceived performance by students



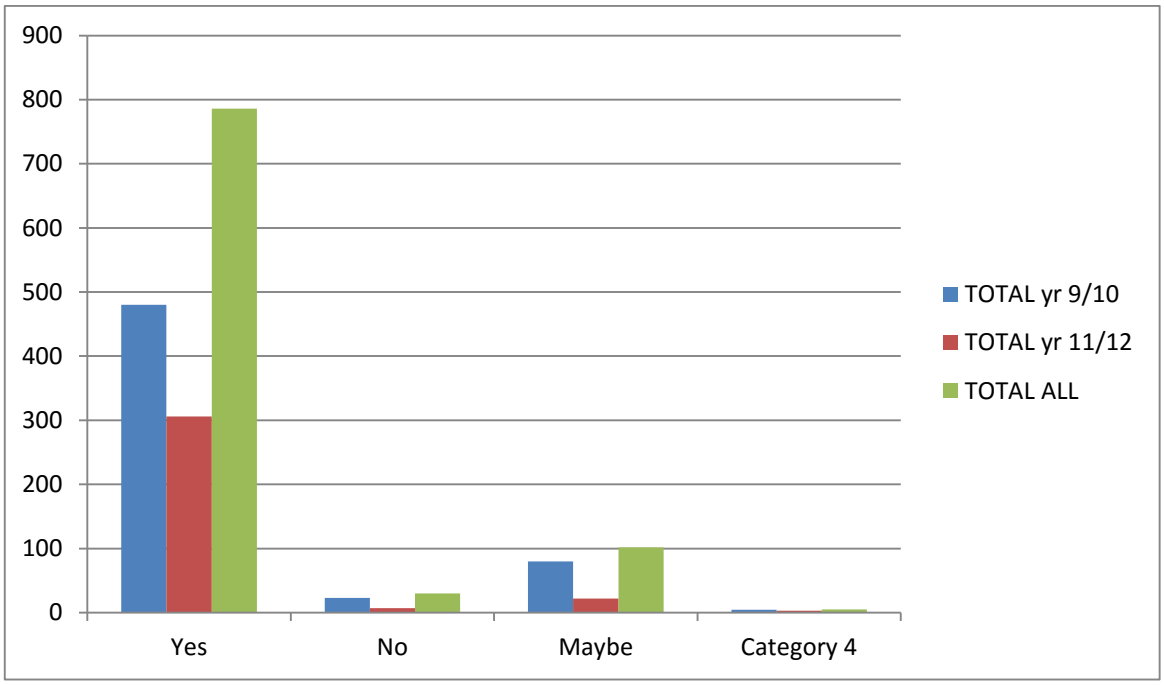
Graph three Intention to remain at school



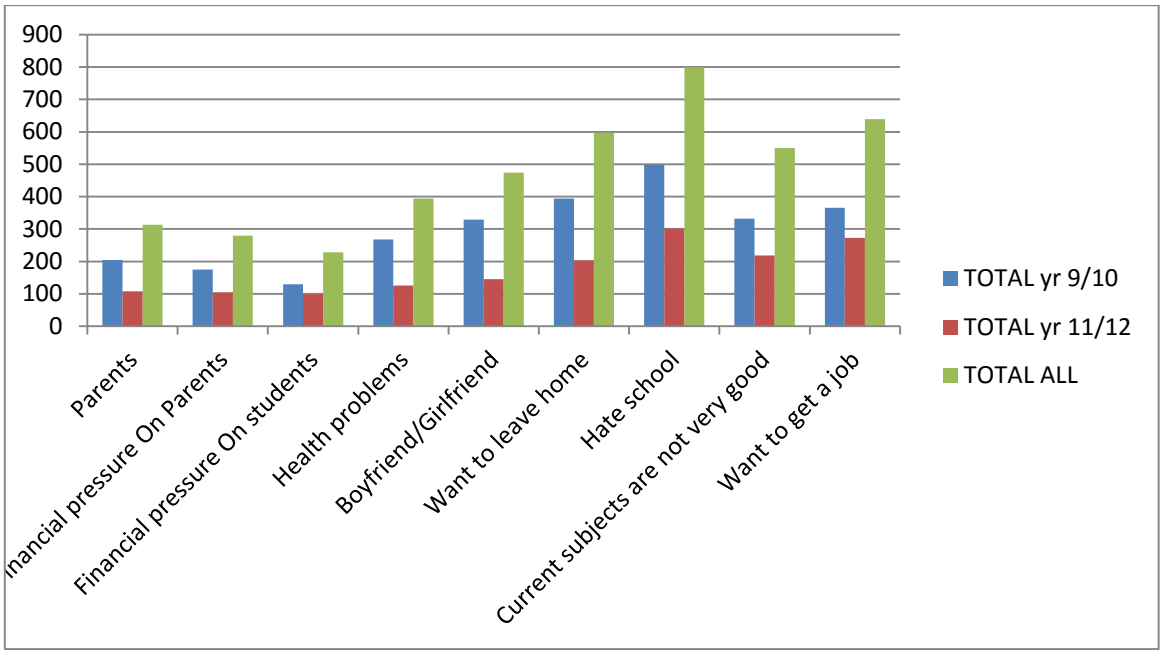
Graph four Information sources



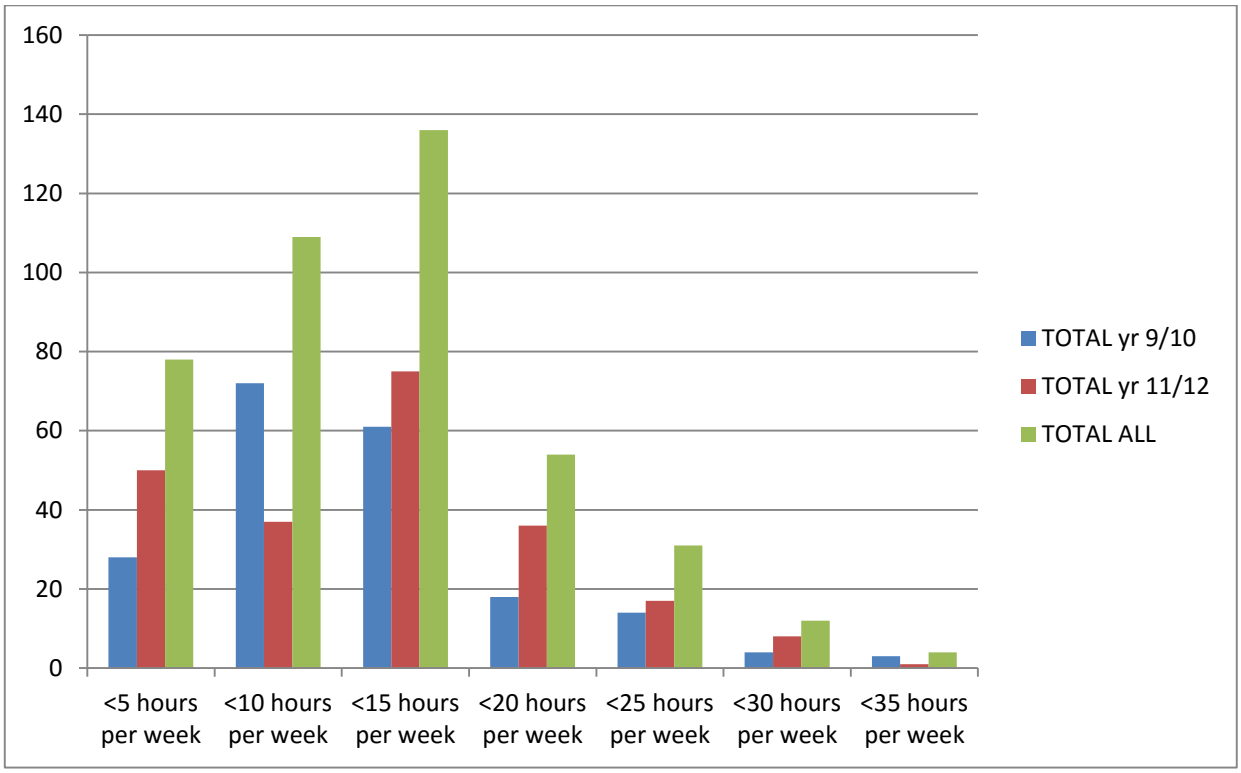
Graph five (a) Importance of education



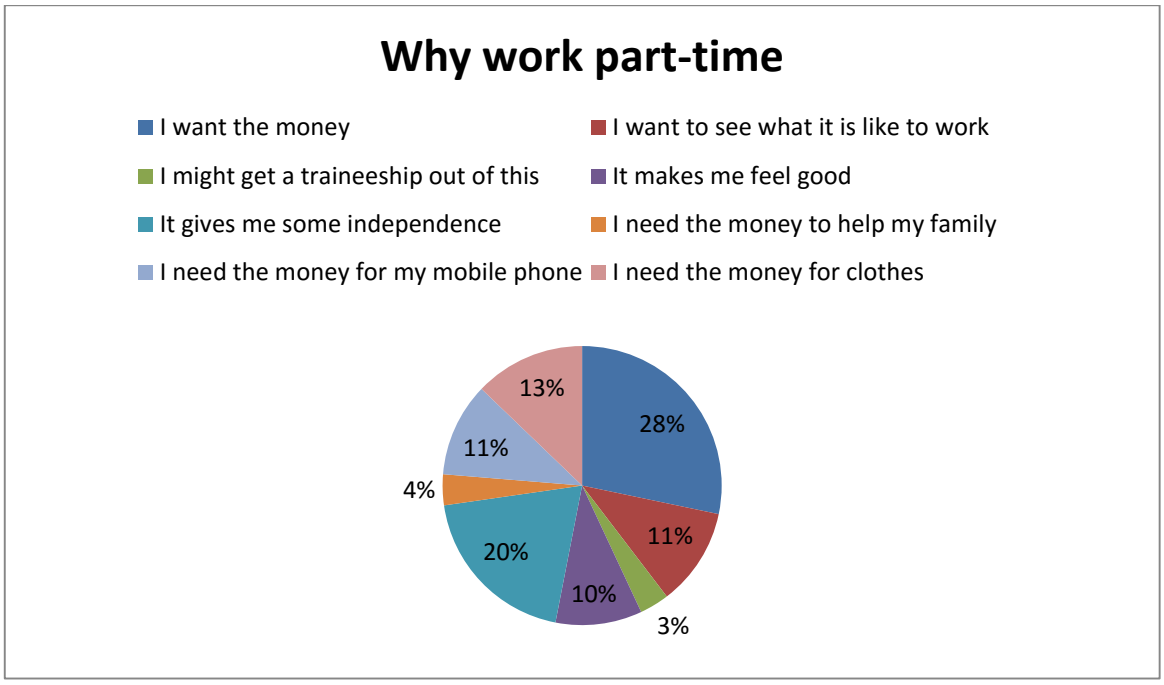
Graph five (b) Importance of education



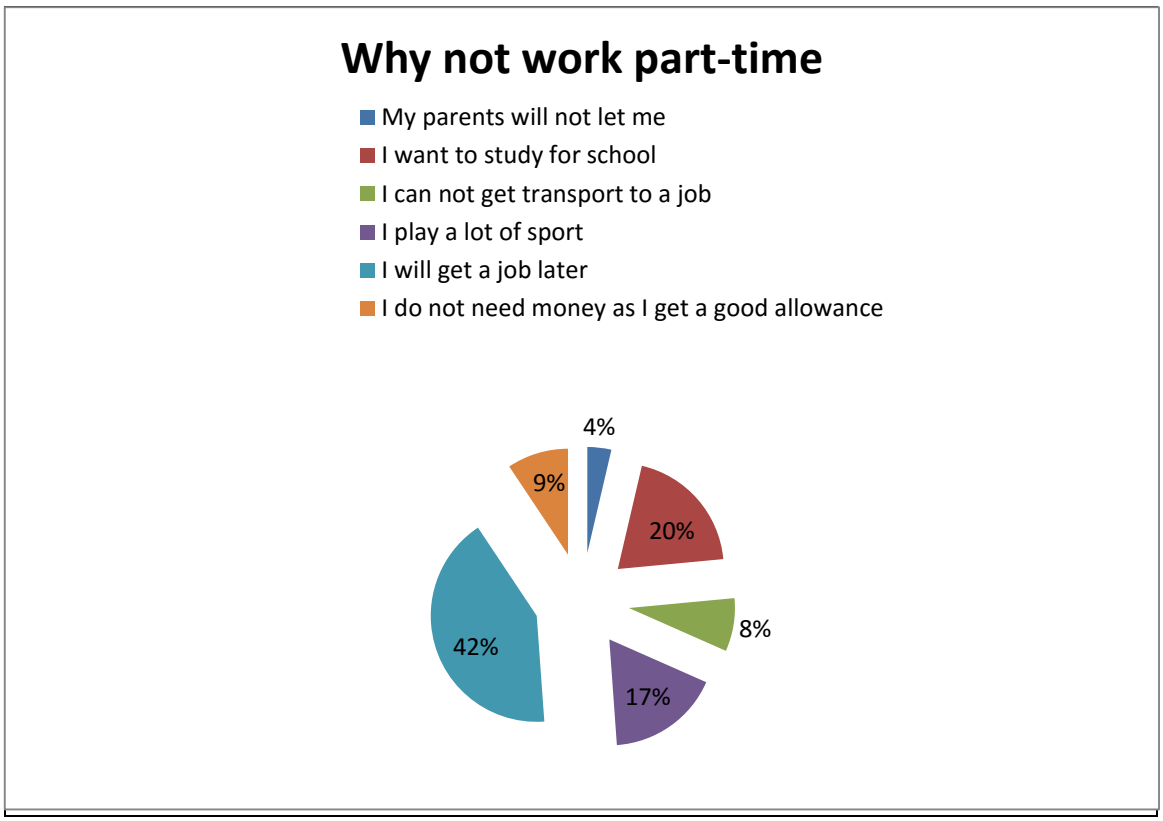
Graph six Reasons for leaving school early



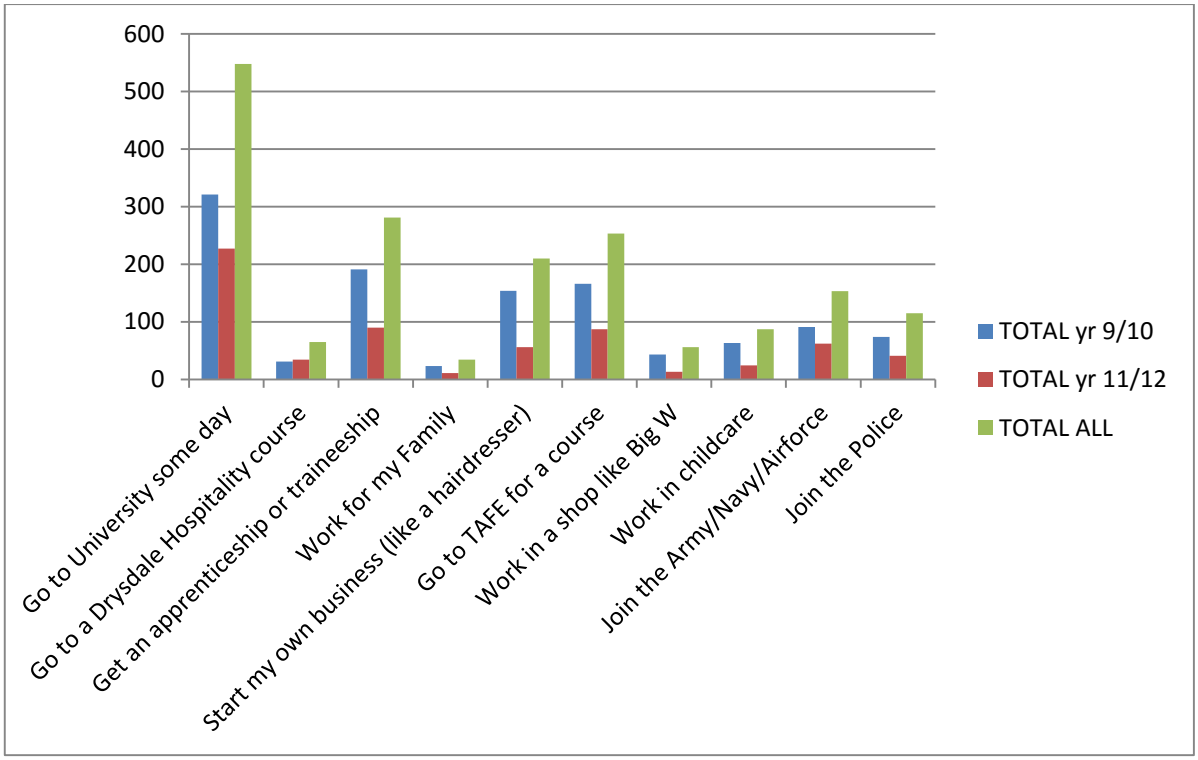
Graph seven Part-time work



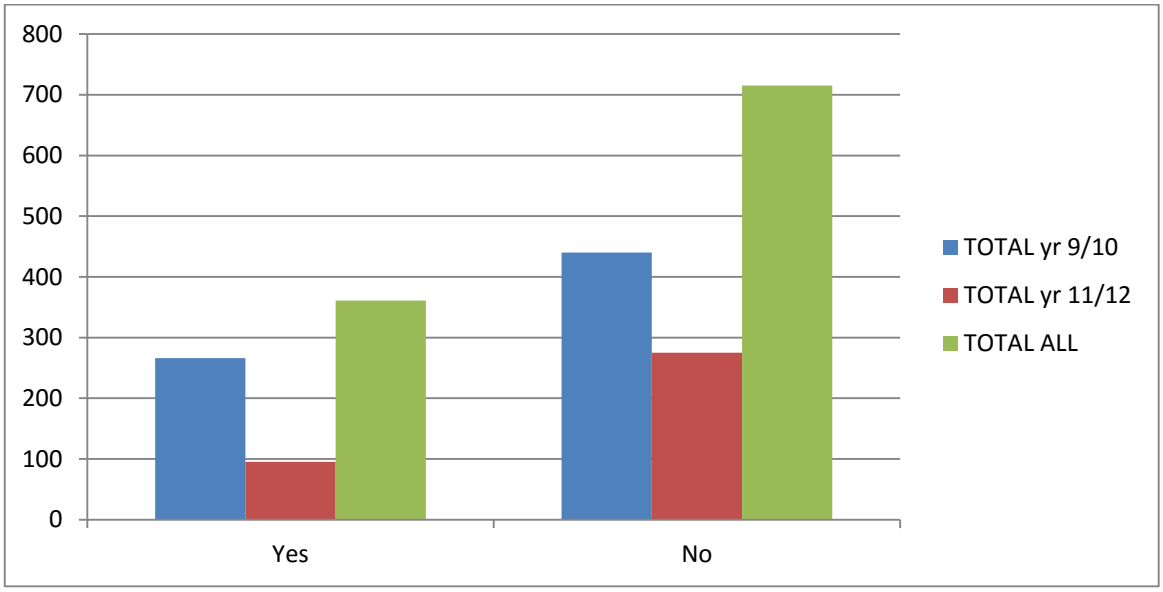
Graph eight (a) Why work part-time



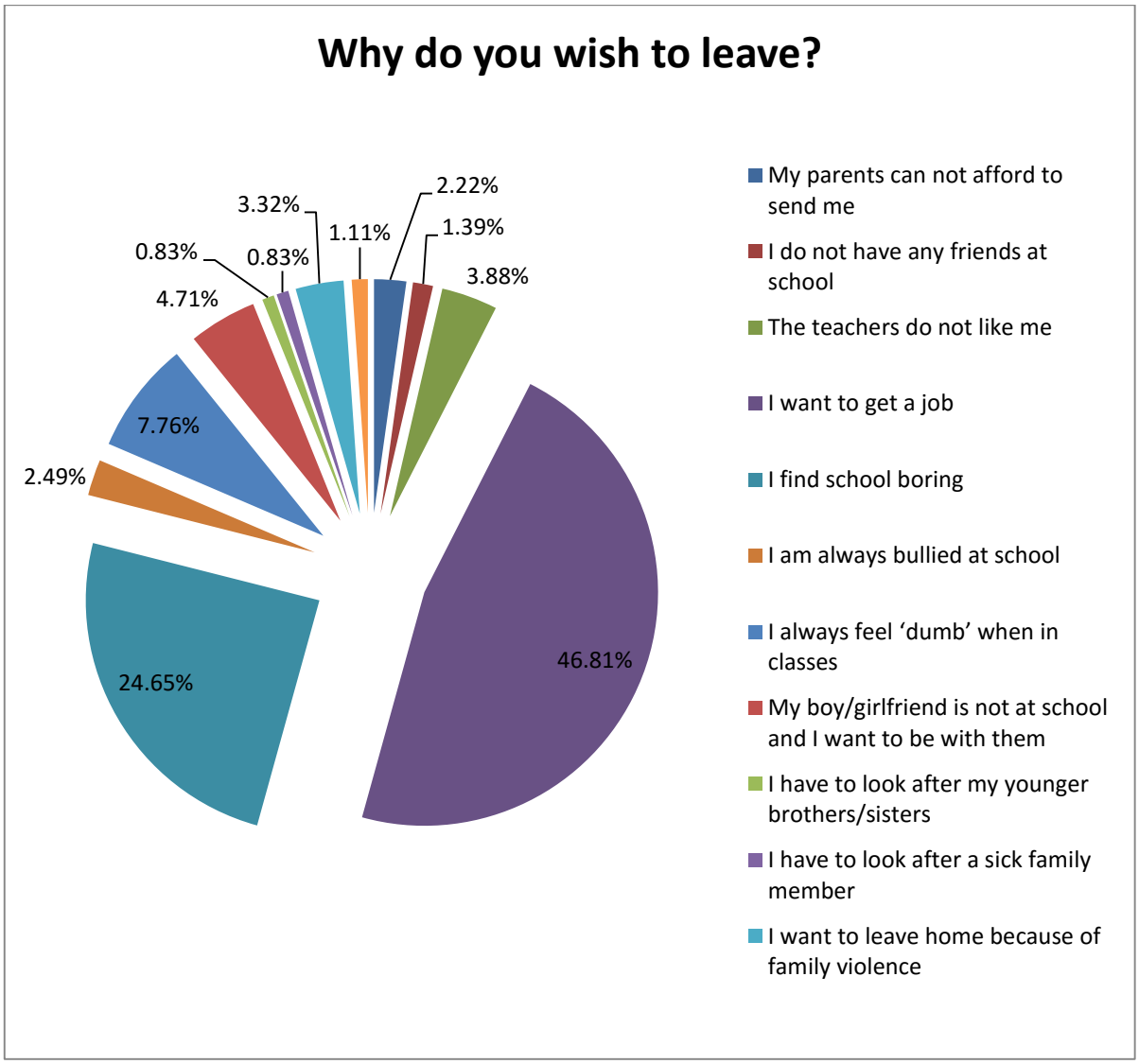
Graph eight (b) Why not work part-time



Graph nine Career goals



Graph ten (a) Future school intentions (Leaving early)



Graph ten (b) Factors affecting intentions of leaving school

APPENDIX 8

SAMPLE Letter

Dear XXXX,

I am writing to invite your participation in research to look at the following statement:

Factors influencing early school leaving

The research to be undertaken requires some face to face interviews based around a series of questions relating to your decision to leave school prior to the end of year 12. I assure you that you would remain anonymous and the information gathered would be structured so as to maintain your privacy and the confidentiality of any information you may mention in the interview. If you wish to withdraw your information at the completion of our discussion you may do so.

I have included an Information sheet with further details about this study. I have also included a reply paid envelope and an email address for you to contact if you either require any further information or wish to inform me of your willingness to participate. At an initial meeting I will further explain what steps will be undertaken to maintain your privacy and confidentiality with any information gathered.

Your assistance in the interview process will be greatly appreciated and provide some data that may assist both schools and students in trying to limit the number of early school leavers.

I look forward to your positive reply.

Yours faithfully,

P.O. Box

This study has been approved by the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee. If needed, verification of approval can be obtained either by writing to the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee, c/- Office of Research and Development, Curtin University of Technology, GPO Box U1987, Perth, 6845 or by telephoning 92662784.

CONSENT FORM

Title of Project: **Factors influencing early school leaving**

1. I have read and understood the 'Information Sheet' for this study.
2. The nature and possible effects of the study have been explained to me.
3. I understand that the study involves a face to face interview were I will be asked a series of questions relating to my reasons for leaving school prior to the completion of year 12
4. I understand that participation involves the risk(s) that my interview could become public. I accept that all care will be taken to store the audio records of my interview within a secure location and my real name will not be used.
5. I understand that all research data will be securely stored for five years [or at least five years], and will then be destroyed [or will be destroyed when no longer required].
6. Any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.
7. I agree that research data gathered from me for the study may be published provided that I cannot be identified as a participant.
8. I understand that the researchers will maintain my identity confidential and that any information I supply to the researcher(s) will be used only for the purposes of the research.
9. I agree to participate in this investigation and understand that I may withdraw at any time without any effect, and if I so wish, may request that any data I have supplied to date be withdrawn from the research.

Name of Participant: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Name of investigator Brian Marshall

Signature of investigator _____ Date _____

This study has been approved by the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee. If needed, verification of approval can be obtained either by writing to the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee, c/- Office of Research and Development, Curtin University of Technology, GPO Box U1987, Perth, 6845 or by telephoning 92662784.

Factors influencing early school leaving

- For the recording could you state your first name only.

- You understand and accept all of the information given to you about maintaining confidentiality and privacy?

- What age are you now?

- After seeing a number of your peers leave school early what do you believe are the main reasons behind their decision

- What reasons did they give you for leaving school prior to the end of year 12?

  - Why did they leave school early?
    - Was it due to lack of motivation?
    - Was it due to student values and beliefs?
    - Was it due to the values and beliefs of Parents?
    - Was it due to prior effects?
    - Was it due to health pressures?
    - Was it due to economic pressures?
    - Was it due to the values and beliefs that underpin our education system?
    - Why do you think most of the students remain?
    - Are there characteristics of the teachers that affected their ability to learn?
    - Is there some course or subject the disengaged need?
    - Is there a need for intervention at an earlier stage?

- What are they doing at present?
- Do they have a personal pathway plan for their future?
- Would they undertake further study?
- Are you still friends with your friends from school days?
- Has leaving early affected your relationships?
- Has leaving early affected their earning capacity?
- What advice would you give to current students thinking about leaving school early?
- What would you say to your former teachers?
- What would you say to new teachers?

MINUTE

Curtin
UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

To	Brian Marshall
From	Dr Tony Rickards, Coordinator Human Research Ethics Science and Mathematics Education Centre.
Subject	Protocol Approval Number SMEC 20070015
Date	Form B submission date 8th March 2008
Copy	Prof Darrell Fisher

For and on behalf of:
Office of Research and Development

Human Research Ethics Committee

TELEPHONE 9266,2784
FACSIMILE 9266 3793
EMAIL Iteasdale@curtin.edu.au

Thank you for your Form C Application for Approval of Research with Minimal Risk (Ethical Requirements) for the project titled "FACTORS INFLUENCING EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING.". On behalf of the Human Research Ethics Committee I am authorised to inform you that the project is approved.

Approval of this project is for a period of twelve months from 9th March 2007 to 8th March 2008 .

If at any time during the twelve months changes/amendments occur, or if a serious or unexpected adverse event occurs, please advise me immediately. The approval number for your project is on the top of this letter. *Please quote this number in any future correspondence.*

Tony Rickards PhD.
Coordinator for Human Research Ethics
Division of Science and Engineering.

Please Note: The following standard statement must be included in the information sheet to participants: *This study has been approved by the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee. If needed, verification of approval can be obtained either by writing to the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee, c/- Office of Research and Development, Curtin University of Technology, GPO Box U1987, Perth, 6845 or by telephoning 92662784.*

A "Form B" is to be completed and returned to the Secretary, Human Research Ethics Committee C/- Office of Research & Development, twelve months following initial project approval ie,prior to the expiry date. If any alterations or changes to the study apply prior to the expiry date, this "Form B" should be submitted to the Committee at that time. An application for renewal may be made with a Form B three years running, after which a new application form (Form A), providing comprehensive details, must be submitted.

The form is available at: http://research.curtin.edu.au/ethics/DFiles/HREC-FormB-Nov05.doc